

ONCE I BELIEVED: EVANGELICAL SEXUALITY, CRITICAL THINKING, AND THE  
PROCESS OF CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

### ONCE I BELIEVED: EVANGELICAL SEXUALITY, CRITICAL THINKING, AND THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

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*Once I Believed: Evangelical Sexuality, Critical Thinking, and the Process of Change* questions the boundaries of literacy studies scholarship on home discourse communities, using religious students as a case study for groups that may or may not sit outside the boundaries of inclusive pedagogical strategies. With the current political climate, there is a widening gap of understanding between Evangelical students and teachers in the writing classroom, particularly around the concept of critical thinking. With Literacy Studies describing learning as embodied, political, and culturally situated, this dissertation looks outside the classroom at how individuals learn in their daily lives when it goes beyond performative and has lifelong and communal ramifications. Drawing on Gender Studies and Religious Studies, this project specifically looks at one of the dominant and embodied markers of adherence to Evangelicalism and its teachings: sexuality. It asks the question: how do Evangelical people experience a shift in their perspective toward sexuality, particularly when coming from such a powerful religious discourse community? Using auto-ethnographic informed qualitative inquiry, this project is based on interviews with individuals who grew up in Evangelicalism and later in life made a public shift in their sexual beliefs and practices. By looking at this high cost and public manifestation of perspective shifting and change, we are able to see how people learn even when the stakes are very high. Understanding the stakes of those situations as students experience them is an essential move toward imagining more inclusive pedagogies.

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## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

TW: Sexual abuse, sexual assault

*I was nineteen and sitting in a California basement, far from my midwestern home. I was surrounded by twenty other young people whom I had been living and traveling with for the last two years as part of a Christian ministry that organized youth conferences. We were all facing the front of the room where seated in a chair was my friend, Josh. He was crying and had his face in his hands. Next to him stood one of our leaders, and she began, "Josh has something he needs to confess." Earlier that day, we had gone to the beach about which Josh stated, "Today, I lusted after some of you at the beach." Our leader asked him to identify those in the group he had lusted after. As he went around the room naming different women, some silently cried while others comforted them.*

*I panicked and ran through the mental checklist of what I had worn or what I had done during that day. I thought of the ugly, dark brown, one-piece swimsuit I wore which had been the most modest one I could find during a last minute shopping trip to the local Target. Did I walk around too much without a towel on? Did I run into the waves or do anything that might be interpreted as flirting? Then I dug deeper. Did I want him to flirt with me? Was I looking for attention from men? Surely, a part of me wanted that, right? Even if I was aware of it or not, I probably did, and that probably came through to him. I thought of all the past bad things I had done and how the reason I had to buy that swimsuit was because I only had bikinis along. But I was trying to change all that now and be better. I was trying so hard to be good, but maybe who I was deep down inside was so bad that it hung on me like a smell. All of these thoughts ran through my head in two minutes he spent identifying others.*



*I also found a different, more dangerous and uncharacteristic feeling burning in me: anger. Josh was my good friend. He was not terribly well liked by the others in our group. His dishevelled, unkempt appearance reflected the depression I knew he struggled with. But he and I had bonded over books and music. We talked for hours about ideas and life. He was dry and witty and reminded me of home somehow. I couldn't identify it then, but I now can name that we shared a similar existential angst and a latent intellectualism that I would not identify as a source of a deep need in me until a good decade later. He was a converted Christian, but he grew up Jewish, and the stories of his family and upbringing filled me with curiosity about a world I knew nothing about. When his sister came to visit earlier that year, she ran up and hugged me and told me how much her brother had talked about me. I knew then that our friendship meant something to him, and truth be told, I thought he might have a tiny crush on me, which I knew he was too shy and respectful to do much about. But he was vulnerable and felt outside in our group. Earlier that year, he had injured his head and broke his leg while snowboarding, which made it hard for him to keep up in the group. He had to sit on a towel that day at the beach while others swam and ran around. I had watched him slip deeper and deeper into depression which our talks seemed to help less and less over time. He wore the same clothes day after day. He wore a snow hat even at the beach to cover his unwashed hair. He gained a lot of weight. His sister wrote to me that she was worried.*

*I had also found out some information that day that others in that room did not know. One of our two heads of the ministry, the only ones over the age of 25, had been molesting children and teenagers, a crime he would later go to prison for. Our other leader had repeatedly singled out young women in the group and sexually harassed them, blaming them for causing his*

*own unfaithfulness to his wife. At the same time, these two leaders had required that no one in our group have romantic relationships or date, a rule that was vigilantly upheld.*

*When Josh finally said my name, I did not cry or want comfort, I was shaking and furious. This was a moment of realization I allowed myself to look full in the face: I did not agree with what was happening. As part of this Christian group, the design of right and wrong, success and failure, and their subsequent consequences did not line up with my own sense of justice. Josh was publicly punished for thoughts that, without his confession, we were unaware of and unharmed by while the leaders who were caught causing deep and profound harm were privately dealt with and allowed to continue leading the ministry. Prior to this moment, throughout my life, when my internal senses did not line up with Evangelical teachings or community practices, it was my internal compass that was flawed and mistaken. In this moment, I began to listen to myself.*

Twenty years later, I was an assistant in a First Year Writing program at a large Midwestern University when a young woman came into the office with a complaint. Her teacher had shown the movie *Her* in her WRA 101 required freshman writing class. During the movie, there is a sex scene that the student deemed too graphic in accordance with her Christian religious beliefs, so she got up in the middle of the movie and left class. The teacher had warned the class before the movie about the sex scene, but the student said the movie began immediately after the warning, and she felt there was not space to leave at that time. To complicate the situation, the teacher felt the student resisted his teaching because of his ethnicity and disability, and bias was embedded in her complaint.

The First Year Writing team considered this situation from multiple angles. Angle one: in the college writing classroom we ask students to use writing to critically examine materials,

communities, discourses, and ideas that they have and will encounter. The student needs to participate in that sometimes stretching and challenging process in order to have the full university classroom experience. Angle two: we are on a college campus that has just experienced a large and important sexual assault case. We are learning to be more sensitive to the ways we approach sexuality in the classroom and in social spaces. We do not know this student's sexual history, and this movie may also be triggering past harms that we are unaware of. Angle three: this situation represents another of the complicated relationship of religion and oppression with factors of race and disability coming into play. All of these angles overlapped and blended together, and with each bringing insights, each also raised more questions. Why do Christian students in the classroom invoke so many difficult situations and reactions? Why is sexuality one of the most fraught topics in the classroom and should we just avoid it altogether? How do home communities impact learning? What happens when we do not agree with the beliefs and practices of our students? Do we carry an ethical responsibility in the classroom to encourage students to consider new perspectives? What is important to us about learning?

I tell these two stories side by side because they demonstrate the internal hold and power a home discourse community can have over an individual alongside what happens when that person moves into another community that collides with the values of his or her home community. I lived and embodied being torn between my home culture and those that I encountered as I moved through the world. I know well the pain of not knowing if my own sense of self could be trusted or if it was flawed in the same way I had been taught all people were flawed. I imagined the twenty year old version of myself sitting in that classroom and trying to decide what to do during the movie's sex scene, whether to get up and risk critique from my peers and teacher, or stay and allow myself to watch a sexual act, which would imprint images

and thoughts on my mind that would make me “impure” and cause me spiritual harm. I could not help thinking through some of the internal angst and wrestling that perhaps this young woman also felt during that movie. I had to imagine myself in that situation because I did not go to college until much later than this young woman due to some of the same religious teachings on gender and sexuality. Instead, I went more than a decade later and with three kids. I tell these two stories together because they represent many stories, some of which will be shared in this dissertation.

The heart of research is a search for understanding, and my search for understanding regarding my own experiences with Evangelical sexuality teachings and what role they play in learning began long before this dissertation project. The research inquiry described here simply reflects another shift in where and with whom I look for understanding. It also reflects a change in not only where I find this understanding, but also with whom I share it. For this project inquiry, I sought out others who likewise had distinct lifelong journeys with Evangelicalism, and I worked to answer the larger research question that brings together my worlds of Evangelical culture and my commitment to learning: **How do people from Evangelicalism, a powerful home discourse community, change their sexual beliefs and practices, and what can this process of change reveal to us about learning?** Embedded in this question is another that I likewise use this space to explore and articulate: what does sexuality have to do with learning? I will share from interviews I conducted with five people who grew up in Evangelical faith communities and later had a shift in their beliefs and practices. The interviews had an emphasis on beliefs around sexuality because it is viewed as a dominant marker of faith practices as it carries a binaried, public outward appearance and carries some of the strongest communal ramifications. The beginnings and ends of change and shifting are not always possible to mark,

so we hunt among the rocks near the start line, and there is no finish line. I share this project not only with an academic audience for which it is logistically designed, but I also share it with my participants and others we know are out there and likewise carry this thread in their lives.

I asked each of my participants at the end of their interviews why they wanted to tell their story and what purpose they hoped it might serve in the telling. I have had to ask myself that same question in composing this piece. What do I want? More than anything, I want people, and specifically educators, to “see” these participants and the students they might represent. I want them to see past their outward cultural identifications and privileges to see the ways they are human and at times, in acute need of help. I have labored with how to simultaneously examine and peer behind the veil of our views of Evangelicals, particularly white, American Evangelicals. Even writing and reading the terms, ‘white, American, Evangelical’ elevates my heart rate in the alienation I feel towards the image of the person those terms construct. My participants are those terms, but they are not. I recognize and carry within me the weight of the harm that has been done by Evangelicals to other communities both historically and ongoing. My focus here is not to defend, but to bring understanding, invoke compassion, and occasion self-reflection. My participants and I have likewise experienced harm through these teachings, and we also recognize we at times have acted as perpetrators in that harm. Intersecting dynamics of race, class, and gender are always present in these stories, as they are always present in every story.

## THE PROBLEM

At the same time I hope to humanize and contextualize my participants, I am alarmed when I read some of the literature regarding the struggle with Evangelicals in academia as they are increasingly being characterized as problematic in the writing classroom, and the university more broadly (Vander Lei, Thomas-Bunn, Bloom, Geiger, Lynch, Patterson). These conflicts

have reached a stronger key with Evangelicals support of the presidency of Donald Trump and the correlating rise in hate crimes and speech (Harris, Stetzer, Wong). Religious discourse communities are sometimes considered in pedagogical scholarship (Heath, Davila), but Evangelical students are often described through a problem framework (Patterson, Geiger, VanderLei, Lynch).

One aspect of this problem framework that is one of the foundational inquiries of this project is the view that Evangelical students are incapable of engaging in critical thinking. A 2017 study done by Heather Thomas-Bunn with 40 composition teachers noted that the four dominant issues that instructors she interviewed had with Christian students were critical thinking, audience awareness, appropriate use of evidence, and tolerance. Heather-Bunn described these four critiques as ways that Christian students did not conform to academic norms. These four issues revolve around students being able to engage in honest inquiry, using evidence applicable to a non-religious audience, and considering countering viewpoints to their own. The lack of critical thinking was the number one of the four issues Thomas- Bunn found the instructors had with Christian students in her study. One of the participants said regarding Evangelicals and critical thinking,

It's hard to steer them away from making religious arguments if they are religious and I don't feel like I want to spend my time, as a teacher, getting into that discussion. It gets way too into content and way far away from writing, and partly because I just don't think that most of them are capable of doing the intellectual work to really look at the issue (280).

Religious students are often seen as lacking creativity, thinking in binaries, committed to an absolute version of their own truth, and resistant to engaging with material or ideas that are

contrary or act as a threat to their own beliefs. Keith Gilyard in his book, *Composition and Cornel West*, says, “I doubt that high-volume creativity is going to flow from fundamentalist or evangelical students. Their religiosity tends not to be of the prophetic, social ameliorative type but the conservative, George W. Bush type.” (57). With critical thinking having a somewhat contested, shifting, and nebulous definition which leads to varying practices of assessing its presence and acumen (Alston), the correlation between religious students' demonstration of critical thinking and incapability to engage in intellectual rigor and creative thinking is troubling.

Through looking at my participants' stories of *actual* perspective change that is operationalized in costly ways alongside acknowledging the problematic aspects and impacts of Evangelicalism, I hope to further highlight the potential destructiveness we as educators can perpetuate towards viewing people groups, particularly difficult ones, as monolithically problematic. In that dichotomy, I also hope to show the opportunity we have in reaching those in isolating and controlling communities when we “see” these students past their outwards identifiers and allow them to experience a relationship and a space where they can be acknowledged and valued as humans. As educators, we often ask students to attempt to “see” other perspectives and listen deeply to others' stories, but these participants, representing our students, ask us to see *them* as individuals who simultaneously inhabit and uninhabit the stories told about them. They call ‘home’ a culture that has harmed them and pushed them away. We might not agree with the impetus for why that student left the classroom with the movie *Her*, but we can seek to understand how that particular belief system motivated her into a confrontational action and what those systems of thinking and control might mean for our students, for learning in general, and for our polarized world right now.

## TERMINOLOGY

Defining some of the terms used in this dissertation is not simply for the sake of readability, but looking at some of the terms, and how we use them, reveals some of the nuanced relationship with labeling, both inside and outside Evangelical and religious circles. ‘Christians’ are at times, in the academy particularly, viewed as monolithic instead of intersectional and diverse (Cavallaro, Thomas - Bunn, Chavez, Daniel, DePalma). I have found in my reading that ‘religious,’ ‘Christian,’ and ‘Evangelical’ are often interchangeable, sometimes problematically so. Heather Thomas-Bunn in her article “Mediating Discursive Worlds” noted that often teachers use Christian, Fundamentalist, and Evangelical interchangeably in the classroom which quickly alerts students who belong to those faith practices that the teacher is unaware of religious distinctions and puts students on the defensive for essentialism. Many Christians and Evangelicals would not consider themselves Fundamentalists as that label carries its own stigmas even within Christian circles as they are at times considered those that operate in a more extreme version of Christianity. The misunderstanding of labels is not only from others outside the Evangelical faith, but often even people within it might not understand the clear distinctions in the different terms and/or might overlap them in usage. In her study, Thomas-Bunn said that most Evangelical students labeled themselves as Christian even if their practices and their denominations are labeled ‘Evangelical.’ In fact, ‘Christianity’ is an umbrella term that Evangelicalism falls under along with Catholicism, Protestantism, Fundamentalism, and others, although, many people equate the term ‘Christian’ to a religious practice that more closely resembles Evangelicalism than Catholicism, for example.

For this paper, I borrow the definition of ‘Evangelical’ from Religion scholar, Amy DeRogatis, who describes them using four attributes: (1) “grouped together by their emphasis on



personal conversion, (2) the authority of scripture, (3) their belief in the imminent return of Christ, and (4) their desire to spread the gospel” (7) (numbers added). Because each of these attributes are important for this study, I will describe each more carefully.

“Personal conversion” or ‘personal salvation’ places an intense emphasis on individual conformity and internal allegiance to faith practices. It is not enough to go along with the outer displays of religion - Sunday services, reading the bible - your inner person must also be in constant alliance at all times, particularly when away from the group. Your thought life must always be fixed on your ultimate goal of salvation. Entertaining doubts or questions is risky and even at times considered sinful which is based upon and reinforced by a myriad of Evangelical teachings, but in particular it was those based on the heart being a source of evil, as seen in the verse from Mark 7, “For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” Doubt and questioning are often associated with some of these internal thoughts that can lead one astray. Although conversion is considered a very individual choice, that choice opts you into laying aside your personal way of thinking and instead committing to thinking communally and allowing that God and his followers will guide your life. You acknowledge that your personal way of thinking is only one flawed vantage point, and that it takes a community of people and hundreds of years of history to inform a Godly life.

The “Authority of Scripture” is distinct in Evangelicalism because it dictates that scripture is God-breathed and relevant in *any* context as it is written. God had enough wherewithal to inspire scripture that would be relevant and translatable to any time, place, or culture. It does not *need* to be seen through a historical or interpretive lens (although it certainly

is in some churches). The challenge of this view is that even though in theory it makes the bible literal and clear, it simultaneously opens it up to very broad interpretations. Particularly in non-denominational churches that do not require adherence to a collective denominational doctrine, scriptural interpretations and applications can vary wildly according to the community and/or leadership, who at times have no theological education or qualifications.

The belief in the “imminent return of Christ” and “the desire to spread the gospel” go hand-in hand in raising urgency among Christian communities. Christ could come back today, and those who are not saved will be lost forever. Eternity seems almost obsolete and difficult to grasp in its absoluteness and intangibility, but even that elusiveness plays into the urgency. At times, blind trust is required because God and eternity are beyond what our mortal minds can imagine or comprehend. At the same time, being lost forever hits close to home if you have friends or loved ones who do not have personal salvation or conversion. The urgency of the unknown alongside its fatal permanence often leads to strict control of loved ones out of fear for their safety. Control and restriction are often not done out of cruelty or overt manipulation, but out of love and concern. If your child is about to run out into a busy street, you would grab them - even forcefully if you had to- in order to save them (this is a real example given in churches as justification for certain legalisms and control).

For this dissertation, I use the term ‘religious’ to encompass all faith practices, including Islam, Judaism, and Mormonism (though in some sources, “religious” really is only referring to American Evangelicalism). I use ‘Evangelical’ and ‘Christian’ interchangeably (as they are used in many sources and in many communities) though I will attempt to be as specific as possible when needed. I am focusing on ‘Evangelicalism’ because that particular group of Christians has played a distinct role in formulating, propagating, and enforcing the modern

distinct teachings on sexuality that permeate more broadly into other denominations in Christianity (Ingersoll, DeRogatis, Klein, Johnson).

Some of my participants identified their upbringing as Fundamentalist, which *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes as a branch of Christianity on the fringe of Evangelicalism. Their devotion to the inerrancy of scripture makes them stand out as they have resisted more modern interpretations of the Bible. They have been actively involved in politics and founded the Christian Coalition. Alongside of Fundamentalism, it is also helpful to note that most of my participants, including myself, have been involved in Charismatic Christianity to varying degrees, which places a greater emphasis on the role of the holy spirit in modern day. It is the representative of the trinity (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit) that they believe is most active in individual lives today. Charismatics believe in the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” which often manifests in practices such as healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy, and laying on of hands. According to *Christianity Today*, most Charismatic Churches are not associated with larger denominations and as such, there are many variations and practices. They note that there are 50 million Christians worldwide who identify as Charismatic. My participants moved between different “versions” of Evangelicalism as they moved from church to church throughout their lives. Even though their individual families uniquely enforced and interpreted Evangelical teachings to differing degrees, the roots are wide-spread and operate out of a larger system that allows for similar practices, teachings, and rhetoric.

My sometimes broad strokes in this paper sit on the margins of essentialization, but this approach is necessary to look at the controlling larger systems in order to contextualize and understand how individual experiences connect to a larger story and to further understand the impact of leaving that system of thinking and its community of practice. I also acknowledge that

I am not theologically trained and am not a religion scholar. I base my interpretations upon a body of primary and secondary sources from religious scholars as well as my participants' and my own lifetimes of communal experiences and daily investments in Bible study and memorization.

## BROADER EXIGENCY

### *Why Evangelicals?*

With Christianity having a fraught history of oppression in many forms, why do we consider their experience at all when as a system they have repeatedly not considered others? There are no easy answers, but I will explore here three potential answers for why now is an exigent moment to look at Evangelicals. Firstly, there are strong historical connections between Christianity and literacy that are deeply embedded in some of our current educational practices. Second, Evangelicals play a prominent role in the current American political state and the ways Evangelical political participation is often imbued with issues of fear, particularly in relationship to race and sexuality. Lastly, negative responses to Christians in the classroom begs reflection on what we believe about our purpose, motivation, and effectiveness as writing teachers and how our teaching practices and our pedagogical theories align.

### History

Religion and literacy are deeply intertwined throughout the history of education. Indeed, the idea of cultivating literacy outside of a religious context makes the contemporary classroom the exception rather than the norm. Initially, Christians historically helped foster mass literacy and self-interpretation as a means for religious freedom, but over time literacy was used by religious authorities to restrict and regulate conduct. Collins and Blot in their book *Literacy and*

*Literacies* note that they have found through their historical research, “familiar links between political, economic and religious power and the desire to regulate literacy as a means of regulating conduct more generally” (67). This move from religious freedom through literacy to using literacy as a conduct tool is chronicled in Allison Skerrett’s article “Religious Literacies in a Secular Classroom.” She describes how Martin Luther helped develop the Protestant doctrine that says God wants to have a personal relationship with all people instead of Catholic papal authority acting as intermediary between God and man. Because of this personal relationship alongside the rise of English publications (vs. Latin), Luther wanted each person to be able to read the Bible *for themselves*, which subsequently led to the rise of efforts for mass literacy. Formerly, literacy and the Bible had only been for the elite, and literacy acted as a gatekeeping mechanism (still present today).

Over time, religious leaders realized that a communal, prescribed interpretation of texts was needed over individual interpretations in order to maintain a central, controlled doctrine. The prescribed ways of reading these texts also led to “‘literate practices [in school] had been reduced to noninterpretive mechanical processes, which prevented critical thinking and dissent’” (Kaptizke (39) qtd in Skerrett 235). Mass literacy practices were not only controlled by religious authorities, but also by additional power structures that controlled literacy more broadly. Skerrett traces the current restriction of religious student engagement, and student engagement more broadly, back to Christian doctrine which has been concerned with restricting texts to maintain a communal interpretation “particularly in the case of the young, restricting one’s capacities for making meaning” (235). She notes, “This use of power and control is evident in schools from centuries past when religious texts formed the foundation of the literacy curriculum, and it reminds of later and contemporary periods of educational practice that standardizes and restricts

students' engagement with texts" (235). Some of our current practices in restriction of student engagement and experience (standardized testing, common core) have historical connections with religion using curriculum and education as an avenue for norming certain beliefs, knowledge, and meaning-making practices.

### Political Power

The timeliest reason for looking at Evangelical students is their prominent role and power in the political sphere. It is widely established that 81% of Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016, and they are considered one of his largest voting bases. Janelle Wong published an article based on a 2016 study (Barrett et al) she helped conduct exploring why Evangelicals voted for Trump, which was published in *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*. Based on the 10,000 people she and her fellow researchers surveyed, she noted that Evangelicals turned out more for Trump than for any other candidate in the last four election cycles (81). The most cited reason why Evangelicals voted for Trump was a fear of racial and religious change (83).

Even Evangelicals have been curious as to the motivations behind this voting base. A 2018 article in *Christianity Today* by Ed Stetzer discussed a recent study done by the Billy Graham center at Wheaton College looking at the motivations behind this 81%. Even though *Christianity Today* is not academic or scholarly, it is important in looking at the results of Evangelicals evaluating *their own* choices as a sort of self-reflective gesture. Looking at a popular article might also give a stronger glimpse into the minds of the 81% general public. They found that only a third said they were voting specifically for Trump as a candidate while the others were voting *against* another candidate or for key issues along party lines. 59% said their vote was more tied to issues than to a candidate. They studied the major issue typically

associated with Evangelical voters: abortion. They noted that only about a third of Evangelicals identified abortion as the reason they voted for Trump with other issues, such as Economy and Healthcare, taking the top of the list. Although they did not vote for abortion specifically, 75% said they would be willing to vote for a pro-life candidate, no matter the party. Also, many voted *against* the strong pro-choice platform (Hillary Clinton) versus choosing someone who is nominally pro-life.

Since 2011, according to Harris and Steiner in the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, the number of Christians who were willing to vote for a candidate whose personal life carried transgressions against their beliefs went from 30% to 72% in 2016. Evangelicals were willing to sacrifice short term goals of ethical alignment with their candidate for the long term economic and judicial picture. A consequence of this disparity between beliefs and voting, Stetzer in *Christianity Today* noted, is that non-evangelicals who were surveyed identified ‘hypocrite’ as the number one characteristic of Evangelical Christians. With this reputation for being hypocritical and voting for a candidate who openly displays a lifestyle that does not align with Christian values, Wong explored what impact the election had on the growth or decline of Evangelicalism after Trump’s victory. Instead of Evangelicalism experiencing a decline with the harsh critique they came under, they experienced a resurgence, partially she theorizes due to the growing fear in people which Evangelicals acknowledge, but also because of their relative political effectiveness as a voting base.

In addition, the voting disparity between white and POC Evangelicals is much more dynamic than that of white and POC non-Evangelicals, which raises further implications for issues of race within Evangelicalism and politics (Harris and Steiner, Wong). In Wong’s study, they found that 75% of white “born again” evangelicals identified as Republican and voted for

Trump. The next highest group was Asian Americans who had 37% as voting for Trump. Black Evangelicals had less than 10% (89). She also noted that White Evangelicals in the study had more conservative religious views than any other group (88). While the racial discrepancy among Evangelical voting remains vitally important as an impetus for exploration, other even more troubling aspects of Wong's review apply directly to issues seen in the classroom. She noted that 57% of white people feel they are discriminated against in general, but 80% of white Evangelicals feel that Christians are persecuted as much as other minority groups (95). This idea of white Christians feeling minoritized is one of the dominant controversies in academic literature (Wong, Patterson, David, Vanderlei).

The white Evangelical feeling of being persecuted is perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of this project's exigency for me to wrestle with. *I want to make clear that I do not align the experiences of Evangelicals in the classroom with the experiences of oppression and persecution other minority groups face.* I acknowledge Evangelicals, *without a doubt*, represent a cultural majority and obviously, as reflected in the statistics above, hold a position of societal and political power. At the same time, I do think that Evangelical students operate in our classrooms from their personal belief and stance that they are persecuted, and consequently, engage from a defensive position, which produces negative results and interactions for *both* Evangelical students and teachers.

### Core Values about Teaching

This project intentionally looks at the ways Evangelical students challenge our pedagogical theories and practices. Religion and sexuality have historically controlled literacy more broadly, and they continue as factors in a pinnacle of conflict in the classroom (Geiger,



Patterson, Cavallaro). Professor of English as well as Woman and Gender Studies, Gee Patterson in his chapter, "The Unbearable Weight of Pedagogical Neutrality" in the collection *Sexual Rhetorics*, interviewed nine different teachers on the subject of Christians and sexuality in the classroom, and three primary themes emerged: challenging the claim that Christians view themselves as minorities in the classroom, questioning whether or not LGBTQ issues having to be presented neutrally, and challenging the notion that writing teachers should be teaching "just writing" and instead should be teaching "socially just writing" (136). Patterson begins the chapter with an overview of differing scholars' viewpoints on Christian students and sexuality in the classroom. One major viewpoint he elaborated on was Christians viewing themselves as minorities or victims in the classroom. He gave examples similar to the one I opened with where students used their religious beliefs as means for questioning content, but typically with problematic intertwining of race, sexuality, and gender (with discussions of abortion acting as one of the examples). He notes that this victim and minority status does not align with well-established critical theories that demonstrate Christian, heterosexual, and cisgender identities as dominant social groups (135). Also, Patterson points toward Christians' sense of entitlement and right-leaning political power, even to the point of legal action against teachers who discuss what Christians view as problematic material. Patterson's primary argument was that to adopt a stance of neutrality in the classroom in order to avoid sexually controversial topics favors people with privilege and silences necessary narratives. Patterson describes that we don't teach *just* writing even if we wanted to. It is not the nature of writing to simply be words on a page. They have to mean something, and that meaning will always bring with it positionality, experience, context, and power. To not acknowledge that positional aspects of writing, we might as well hand out grammar workbooks and call it good.

I agreed with the contents of this chapter and its points on neutrality and the importance of not avoiding conversations around sexuality, particularly around LGBTQ identities. One challenge I had in this piece was the use of anecdotes of specific Christian students' actions to make his argument for socially "just writing" instead of pointing towards larger systems of power as impetus (140-41). Thankfully, he used the framing offered by one of the interview participants to talk about what socially just writing might look like, calling teachers to move away from using pro-con, binary arguments in the classroom, which limit us in asking the "larger questions", such as "why people are disagreeing?" and "how and why LGBTQ issues become 'controversial issues' in the first place" (139). Patterson's article suggests how sexuality and critical thinking are intertwined in the classroom as teachers attempt to point Christian students towards looking at those larger systems of power through writing while Christian students tend to focus on the materials at hand- the movie *Her*.

Literacy scholarship in the last 30 years has explored the ways writing classrooms and home discourse and cultures interact. In the "Introduction" to *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, the editors note the move towards looking at how various forms of writing and language "carry more, or less, authority in different social and institutional contexts...and the implication those differences have for political influence, access to resources, and opportunity" (Cushman et al 11). They note that the word "discourse" is frequently used in these conversations and characterizes not only "the way one writes (e.g, the grammar of it) but the values, beliefs, and social identities that are associated with that way of writing" (11). John Paul Gee takes the idea of discourse even further in a way that is meaningful for this project,

"At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs,

and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language and surely not grammar, but *saying (writing)-doing, being-valuing-believing combinations*. These combinations I call ‘Discourses,’ with a capital ‘D.’...Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (Gee 526).

I appreciate Gee’s use of the word “right” in his discussion of Discourse. It implies that discourse is set in personal and communal expectation. It implies performance. It implies writing and language as a means of communication with others who might hold different values and beliefs. This becomes relevant for this project as we look at how my participants wrestle with the “right” way to be in the world while set in a community with a clear prescription of what “right” is, and looking at their stories, we can further understand how the idea of “right” plays out, at times contentiously, in the classroom and in writing. Gee also further highlights the notion that teaching writing is never simply about language and grammar, but about values, beliefs, identities, and attitudes.

Gee discusses consequences when there is conflict over home discourse and other discourses such as classroom or academic discourse, “I argue that when such conflict or tension exists, it can deter acquisition of one or the other or both of the conflicting Discourses, or, at least, affect the fluency of a mastered Discourse on certain occasions of use” (Gee 528). With this conflict readily established between Evangelical and academic discourse communities, it begs the question, what is our, the academy’s, discourse, and how does the conflict that arises from it impact our students’ learning?

Paulo Freire’s work in particular talks about the political nature of teaching and that we as educators representing the academy carry, consciously or unconsciously, particular discourse

beliefs and practices in us. He notes, “Experience teaches us not to assume that the obvious is clearly understood. So it is with the truism with which we begin: All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator’s part. This stance in turn implies - sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly- an interpretation of man and the world” (Freire 616). My hope in this dissertation is that we question that which is obvious to us for the sake of students who might not “clearly understand” or even if they do understand, might not agree. Freire notes the importance of this questioning and reflection, “Therefore, the educator must strive for an ever-greater clarity as to what, at times without his conscious knowledge, illumines the path of his action. Only in this way will he truly be able to assume the role of one of the subjects of this action and remain consistent in the process” (Freire 621). I do not necessarily argue in this dissertation for a specific pedagogy or plan of action. Instead, I ask us to question what motivates us, what “illumines the path” of our actions, and what do we believe about the role of home discourse in the classroom.

Many scholars seek to understand their motives and to understand the role of academic discourse in relationship to power while also looking to integrate and positively value home cultures and Discourse (Paris, Heath, Street, Gee). Gee notes, “A Discourse is an integration of saying, doing, and valuing, and all socially based valuing is political. All successful teaching, that is, teaching that inculcates Discourse and not just content, is political” (533). Successful teaching, as prescribed by Gee, and Patterson with “just” writing, addresses Discourse in the classroom rather than ignoring it. With many viewing the writing classroom as a space incapable of neutrality or of simply teaching just writing, ignoring religious students through attempts at neutrality, or even through our lack of personal reflection on our unconscious discourses, also means we may have to ignore other political issues, such as sexuality and race (and all the

various intersections), in our classrooms altogether, which many writing teachers are reticent to do (Patterson, Geiger, Davila, Alexander).

Even if we do not clearly see that which is “obvious” in our academic and classroom discourse, our students often do. Bartholomae describes students’ relationship to academic discourse, “The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy...” (Bartholomae 511). Bartholomae is looking specifically at “basic” writers at the college level, but his thoughts apply to truly most students, particularly those who find classroom spaces at times oppositional or troubling to their home discourses. The caution around operating from an unacknowledged academic discourse and personal belief system is when our students attempt to, at times necessarily so, “locat[e] themselves within the discourse of a particular community-within a set of specifically acceptable gestures and commonplaces - learning, at least as it is defined in the liberal arts curriculum, becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery” (Bartholomae 516). Bartholomae notes that students “must imagine for themselves the privilege of being “insiders” - that is, being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak” in order for success in academic writing (516).

This idea of being an insider or outsider was a powerful dynamic for my participants and I would venture for other Evangelical students. Gee notes what happens when you are not successful in academic Discourse, “Your very lack of fluency marks you as a *non-member* of the group that controls this Discourse” (529). Gee writes from the place of looking at students who are in many ways striving to be “members” in academic Discourse, but what about those students who want to do well as students, but do not necessarily want to be *members* of the academic

Discourse community? Because of this resistance to membership, they can show up as oppositional. But as you will see in the cases of my participants, this desire to *not* be members of Discourses outside of Evangelicalism does not always come from a place of hostility, but from a place of fear and needing to maintain their outside status in the secular world in order to maintain their insider status in the spiritual world. Gee notes, “The problem is deepened by the fact that true acquisition of many mainstream Discourses involves, at least while being in them, active complicity with values that conflict with one’s home-and community-based Discourses” (532). When we ask students to engage in academic Discourse, we are also asking them to comply with our values. What happens when these values conflict with home and community discourses?

This dissertation asks educators to inquire into the “obvious” nature of our academic Discourse, how we operationalize theories around home discourse, and how we view students who are at times oppositional. David Bloome, in his article “What Counts as Evidence in Researching Spoken and Written Discourses?” says on the importance of inquiring into the literacy and discourse practices of diverse and widespread communities, including academic communities, “all research expresses an underlying definition of personhood” (145). *My own* at times alienated response towards Christian students and my subsequent desire to avoid difficult conversations certainly fuel my exploration here in this paper. Why do Christian students make me so angry, and why do I hope that I do not get a vocal one in my classroom? What Discourse am I operating in that conflicts with Evangelical students? Perhaps the most implicating answer in why we should look at Evangelical students is that religious students are still our students and carry personhood, and our actions and our embodied responses towards them reveal important truths about our educational practices and what work we believe takes place in our writing classrooms. I may say I believe in the theories we publish about valuing home discourse and

home literacies, but my practices and even my bodily responses reveal that I am operating out of unexplored limitations to those theories. Evangelical students are important to look at not only for their historical and current political power, but also because they act as a case that calls our assumptions about who, how and why we teach into question.

To truly understand the dynamics Evangelical student's experience as they leave their home discourse communities, in this dissertation, I will share my participants' journeys in perhaps the most fraught and contentious area of Evangelical adherence: sexuality. Through my participants' stories of the conditions and consequences of leaving their home communities, we can begin to understand further that for some of our students, learning a new Discourse which involves "active complicity" with the values of that discourse, carries a heavy cost and can bring great loss. What is important to consider throughout this dissertation and will show up repeatedly throughout my participants' stories is the means and control used to maintain the "active complicity" in Evangelicalism, which is foundational for understanding the cost status for believing students.

## DISSERTATION OUTLINE

In the following chapter, I lay out my methodologies and methods for this project in an attempt to bring greater clarity to my own investments in this project as well as the beliefs and values that I recognize as meaningful and that undergird my approach to my participants and their stories. I introduce each of my participants in this chapter as well.

In Chapter 3, I begin with exploring Evangelical teachings on sexuality in order to establish and demonstrate the structure that participates in enculturating believers into the Evangelical system. I use both primary sources of Evangelical purity texts and secondary sources

of scholars who have researched the long-term impact of purity teachings. Through these I show how purity and sexuality teachings are not only used to construct outward behavior, but internal ways of thinking that map out familiar paths for control. I also explore why sexuality more broadly is important for educators to consider in the context of education and learning. All of this speaks towards what the *theoretical* cost is with a change in Evangelical sexual beliefs and practices.

In chapter 4, I explore the tangible costs my participants specifically experienced in their stories. This chapter in a way models after the narrative flow talked about by Goodson and Gill, with each participant having a space for their stories which are situated around the interview question, “Tell me about a moment when you knew you had changed.” I placed this “flow” style section in Chapter 4 because I wanted to offer the “history” context first in Chapter 3, so you as a reader can experience the stories and dialogues as my participants and I did with those implicit cultural understandings and teachings in our purview at all times. I also wanted to honor their stories by allowing them to be told individually instead of broken up by theme per se. This section offers evidence for the cost of change as well as gives us a glimpse into what thought processes and life experiences lead to costly change.

From these stories, I work to tie together, in Chapter 5, the cost of change and moving into new discourse communities with notions of literacy and learning, particularly in relationship to critical thinking. Some of my participants' stories continue in detail as the same systems of control that impacted sexuality also impacted learning with control over media intake, educational curriculum, and the social conditions of learning. This was often accomplished through homeschooling which 4 out of 5 of my participants were a part of for some period of their education. Understanding how broad reaching these systems of control are and how costly



and challenging it is to break out of them offers insights for educators in relationship to how Evangelicals might practice critical thinking as academia has defined it.

The culmination of these chapters offers an admonishment for understanding and perhaps a reconsideration of how we might approach or consider our own academic norms related to critical thinking, home discourse, and socially just writing. Through my participants stories bookended between two outward expressions - sexuality and literacy- of internal and systemic control, we can begin to operate with more nuanced thinking (I include myself in this). My hope is that through placing side by side throughout this dissertation the macro cultural and micro individual stories, we are able to see the ways we might also be reflecting our views on the macro culture of Evangelicalism onto individual students when perhaps they are walking in stories similar to my participants.

## CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "How Do I Love Thee. Let me Count the Ways" has a piece that somehow simultaneously captures the texture of belief and its lingering effects after its loss, "I love thee with the passion put to use/In my old griefs and childhood's faith./I love thee with a love I seemed to lose/With my lost saints." This line of poetry plays like a script in my mind, more so than any other line of poetry. The loss of my childhood saints lingers and is a longing that has never been met anywhere else. It is the tumbling experience that I can only liken to the first time I fell in love, with all its guileless hope and possibility, that can never be replicated. There is a loss that is understood through shared songs we still hum today. The earnestness of prayers whose cadence still shows up in my poems and journals. It is in the instinctive whispers of 'please help' during the middle of the night. There is still a shared understanding of early years spent vigilantly writing and rewriting ourselves and the strange clarity of your inner voice, when you have made every attempt to beat it down and make it small, and yet it will not be silenced.*

*These feelings are both painful and powerful. They bonded me with my participants, but also made me angry at the lies and harm that undid the beautiful parts of believing. I am angry that leaders and people in power used our young zeal and desire to do good to manipulate and control. There is something wonderful about believing in a good ending to the story...that at the end of all this life, there is goodness, justice, and beauty. To find out the end might just be the end is disorienting in its greyness. My eyes had to adjust to see through to a dimmer, but more real, future. I have not felt joy like I felt when I believed.*

There was a time during my research on Evangelical sexuality that I gave it up. I did not want to continue displaying the traumas of others. It was hard to make an academic audience

understand the nature and power of religious belief. But every time I mentioned that I researched Evangelical sexuality in a group at a bar or dinner party, inevitably, someone would have a story they wanted to share. Every time I presented at a conference, people stayed afterwards to say, yes, that happened to me too. People expressed interest in being interviewed. Between March and August of 2019, I chose five people among those I knew had a story to tell to interview for this project.

My criteria for participants was threefold. My first criteria was each participant had to grow up in Evangelicalism with their families actively participating in the Christian community and their parents enforcing and following those teachings at home. The second criteria was that each participant had to *individually* believe and actively follow Evangelical teachings, particularly those on heteronormative sexuality and purity, at least until their early twenties. In particular, I sought participants who were passionate believers. Four of the five were in paid Christian ministry roles at some point in their lives. The third criteria is that they had to publicly demonstrate a shift in sexual practices either through social media or through living situations (ex. cohabitating).

The connecting powers of social media have allowed me to observe some of my participants from afar for a while. It acted as a tool for me to contextualize what I know of their personal history with their present narrative. I wanted this story to stretch wider, so I chose both men and women, with multiple sexual identities and experiences from around the country. Traditionally, inquiries into Evangelical sexuality teachings have focused on women participants (Klein, Ingersoll, Anderson), but for my study, I also included (self-identified) men. For each of my five participants, I reached out to them through Facebook messenger and inquired after their

interest in the project. Once they agreed, I sent them the more formal informational letter as prescribed by IRB.

Due to my physical proximity as well as relationship depth with each participant, I conducted the interviews wherever the participant felt most comfortable. Three of the interviews were zoom calls without the camera on (one was a failed attempt to have video). One was conducted at my home. The other at a restaurant. The constant was the recording and transcribing of each of them. My first interview was with the participant I am closest to: Maddy. She came to my home, and we sat on my living room floor eating Chinese takeout for lunch while we talked. I selected her first because I knew I could ask questions about the interview process itself with her. If there were snags, she would be forgiving. Frankly, I was nervous, and I needed the Chinese food and a friend to kick off my interviews.

### *Research Dialogue*

I wanted my interviews to be a dialogue rather than a simple question and answer, and I knew this practice would happen more organically with Maddy. It is important to me that my participants are “dialogically and discursively engaged *with* us in making meaning and formulating interpretations of their experiences” (Selfe and Hawisher). I hesitated to change the word “us” to ‘me’ in that quote, but I realize that not only are my participants dialoguing with me, they are dialoguing with each other as well in their shared stories and within this piece of writing. With all of us having shared experiences, we are able to attempt to understand together what took place during that time and how our interpretation of those events has shifted over the years. Thomas King quotes Louis Owens from his book *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions* saying about an experience he had with some childhood friends, “Do

they sit in midlife and wonder as I do, whether it really happened at all? Whether their memories, like mine, are warped and shadowed far beyond reliability?” (95). For some of my participants, such as Maddy, our conversations have extended beyond the interview, and we often find ourselves wondering whether our experiences really happened at all. Did time warp and shadow our memories? These more intentional interviews are an opportunity to collectively piece together what happened, at times in all its absurdity with evil everywhere combated by speaking in tongues. Through dialogue, we are able to find the thread of what happened and validate it as *possibly* real.

Even as we attempt to put the pieces together, we also acknowledge our very act of telling and sharing is changing our experiences into a new form much as King demonstrates throughout his book, *The Truth About Stories*, in the format he changes at the beginning and ending each chapter with the same lines slightly altering each time. My participants each received a copy of their transcripts in order to see how their interpretations might have shifted or grown after reflecting upon our dialogue and even re-experiencing it from a new angle as they read instead of speak. We are creating new knowledge together, putting the pieces of the past, our individual inquiries, and pain in dialogue.

Part of this piecing together Goodson and Gill note helps “locate each story in a broader frame - providing wider historical insights” (40). In their Life History Approach, Goodson and Gill talk about phases of the interview process as they intentionally allow interviewees to “flow” in their stories and tell them as they emerge organically. They try not to interrupt or ask too many questions initially. This allows that participants can order and sequence their life narrative as they see fit. Some of my participants particularly engaged in this practice, and one, Ben, talked for almost 45 minutes straight with only my slight conversational encouragement. “Flow”

also allows for “some remission from the ‘power’ of the initiating interviewer/researcher” (39). Goodson and Gill then note that it is important to then move towards a more structured aspect of the interview. Asking questions after narration

...signals the move from life story to life history, by which we mean the progressive understanding of the life story is being located within its historical contexts through collaborative interpretation and meaning-making, as well as triangulation by using other sources of testimonies, documentaries and historical data (40).

Dialoguing, collaborative interpreting, and meaning making are vital particularly because I am asking my participants about memories and experiences that they have been enculturated to interpret within a religious framework. It can be a sort of unfolding or shedding of the layers of should and should not. At times as well, layers of simultaneous complicity and oppression can be realized, which can be stunning and painful upon first appearance. Allowing meaning to be made through dialogue, the conversations are more nuanced, insightful, and contextualized. We work together “to answer questions and solve problems - as opposed to [me] researching ‘on’ people and their problems” (italics mine) as described in “Community Based Research” by Jeff Grabill. The interviews are only a small piece of this dialogue. We are doing *work* together as we dialogue in the interviews, but also, we work as we dialogue outside the interviews, in our day to day lives.

## WHO AM I IN THIS: POSITIONALITY

With the complex dynamics of dialogue and the composing of others’ stories, it is important that I acknowledge my own positionality as a past member of the Evangelical community, a person in relationship to my participants, and a researcher in the academic community. The teachings and social community built around the set of shared Evangelical

beliefs formed the foundation of my childhood and family life. My dominant social circle growing up was primarily made up of people who also believed and were deeply embedded in Evangelicalism. We went to church every Sunday, sometimes twice. Even when we were on vacation camping, we would get up and drive the hour or more to church. During the week, we had small groups, often at our house. The day to day values of this community permeated my family's lifestyle, communications, and relationships. It showed up in prayers at the dinner table, television watching, books we read and music we listened to. This tight knit community and culture continued into my adult life with bringing my own children to church and leading Sunday schools and small groups. It has been primarily through academic pursuits that I have come to more deeply understand the influence of that community. Because of this deeper understanding, my relationship with Evangelical beliefs and practices has changed, but the communal and cultural aspects are still deeply interwoven in my life with family and friends.

My deeply embedded background is important because as part of Evangelical teachings, there is a caution raised about forming deep relationships with non-believers, so the binary of "inside" or "outside" the community is dynamic and based on a set of shared beliefs and practices rather than other factors, such as location or nationality. Because the insider/outsider binary is such an important factor for trust with Evangelicals, even though my participants and myself do not necessarily ascribe to that binary any longer, the fact that I was once an "insider," much as they were, does grant me an ethos of understanding of my participants' experiences in ways that someone "outside" might not.

I was directly involved in different religious communities with three of my participants at various points in my life from teenage to adult years. Ben and Sarah were a part of the ministry group depicted in my opening story that traveled around the country hosting youth

conferences. Twenty of us between the ages of 18-22 lived together in vans, old school buses, host homes and small roadside motels. We were all young, so everything felt like an exhilarating adventure and like every action and realization was writing something important and meaningful into the world. In short, it was intense. Enough so that many of us have stayed in touch and still feel a shared understanding even decades later. In reality, we were not changing the world around us all that much, but dramatically writing ourselves into the adults we would become. As an aside, but also to situate our religious experiences, most of us later have identified this ministry as carrying many of the identifying characteristics of a cult, and most of us experienced the confusing and uncertain pain of leaving often associated with a cult. Maddy and I went to church together for over a decade. We have traveled the same circles and raised our kids together.

Josh and James, two brothers, loosely knew my personal association with Evangelicalism. I first met James after a kickball game over beers at the local pub. Somehow in the first ten minutes of meeting each other, we found ourselves deep into a conversation about our “crazy” childhoods in the church. It was a quick bonding. When I approached him for the interview, he suggested that I also interview his older brother Josh, who I have never met in person. In the phone interview with Josh in particular, he often took moments to establish that what he was saying was ‘real’ because an outsider might operate out of a certain amount of incredulity with experiences of speaking in tongues, exorcism, or even more simply, the powerful level of control and isolation enacted on children. My deep acquaintance with these topics, experiences, and culture allowed Josh and all of my participants to open up in deeper ways than perhaps they would have to an audience, especially an academic one, unfamiliar with that culture. I had a discussion regarding this cultural understanding with Josh, particularly



around the lack of understanding between intellectuals and those raised in the Evangelical culture, and he described the relationship he has with his partner's father, a prominent scientist:

He can't talk to me about my past. He utterly can't understand where I am coming from at all. It's a little struggle...Intellectual equals generally don't have my background at all, and so, it's like they kind of hit a wall and are like wait a minute, what? How does he come to this conclusion or why did he go this direction?

In general, feelings of misunderstanding with "outsiders" are not uncommon for those coming from powerful discourse communities and home cultures.

At the same time being an "insider" to Evangelicalism and having differing degrees of relationship with my participants, I am also an academic doing research on Evangelicalism. Because of this, I am acutely aware of the negative aspects of that belief group and the positive intersectionality that my research here does not necessarily address. My work focuses on white American Evangelicalism, as that is what myself and my participants represent, but Evangelicalism is practiced around the world and in many communities of color. I hesitated to interview people who grew up as people of color in religious communities as I am not an insider in those communities, and I recognize the ways this would change my understandings of potential participants' experiences. I also want to acknowledge that many individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and/or choose to live outside heteronormativity also identify as Christian. All of these intersections are layered and complex, and beliefs are practiced in a myriad of ways. Many Evangelical communities have recognized and addressed some of the negative aspects of Evangelical sexuality and are working to make changes both locally and nationally. My work does not intend to ignore their tireless work or gloss over the changes they have wrought, but I

hope the stories I tell here support the ongoing work of change and act as support for its necessity.

Because I am exploring American Evangelicalism and all of my participants are white, I am also conscious of scholars expressing concern that white Christians experience themselves as minoritized (Thomas-Bunn, Wong, Patterson, David). Although I already discussed in my exigency section some of my stance on white Evangelicalism and minoritization, it bears repeating. I want to make clear that I do not intend to draw the correlation between white Evangelicals and the experiences of minorities. I do not align the experiences of Evangelicals in the classroom with the experiences of oppression and persecution minority groups face both historically and currently (while also acknowledging intersectionalities as prior addressed). I acknowledge white Evangelicals, without a doubt, represent a cultural majority and operate from a position of societal and political power. Evangelicals operate in the privilege of being able to *choose* to resist in the classroom and to have the option of isolating without dramatic repercussions to their academic standing. Although myself and my participants have experienced pain and trauma as a byproduct of being in Evangelicalism, many of us still have grown up in relative privilege with access to resources, and all of us share in the benefits of systematic racism.

### *Intuitive Knowledge*

With my history as an “insider” alongside my participants’ awareness of my relationship to the Evangelical community, one of the challenges in composing the story of this project is deciphering what is intuitive and what is common knowledge. The indigenous research practice of relationality, recognizing the complex web of connections, including acknowledging the power of knowledge and language developed in these connections. Shawn Wilson in *Research is*

*Ceremony* describes why this research practice is important and how recognizing connections and intuitive knowledge makes room for the humanness of both the researcher and the participants. He notes about the challenge of intuitive knowledge,

I am filled with doubt as to how to proceed...much of this knowledge came to me in an intuitive fashion. In talking about these ideas with the others who were helping me to form them, I often found that just mentioning a word or a phrase would trigger the release of a whole load of information and ideas - within both me and the people I was talking with. All of us were research participants, rather than me being the researcher and them my subjects (69).

I have come to characterize this intuitive knowledge as community or cultural knowledge as many of the intuitions in this particular project are rooted in the knowledge of Evangelical culture from my own lifetime of experiences. The challenge lies with how to cite that which is “common” or known within a given culture when it is often not attributed to a source *per se*. Within this paper, I attempt to explain cultural meanings or intuitions when it seems applicable both from my own experience and also citing from sources, but at times, it is hard to explain the cultural “buy-in” to someone from the outside. This is particularly challenging when discussing faith-based beliefs that at times do not offer logical explanations.

It can be challenging to understand, as an outsider, why anyone would believe in certain claims or identities. For instance, one of my participants refers to a “Jezebel spirit.” This is a semi-common term within Fundamentalist Evangelical communities, but for someone outside that community, it might be unknown even though its interpretation is somewhat recognizable. A “Jezebel spirit” is based upon a queen named Jezebel in The Bible (1 and 2 Kings) who influenced her Jewish husband to adopt her pagan religion on a national level. This

encouragement included killing Jewish prophets who spoke out against her religion. At one point in the story, it was told she applied makeup, wigs, and jewelry in order to “seduce” the new ruler after her husband was killed. All of these actions come under various interpretations, but in the context my participant was using it, it means a woman who is cunning, manipulative, and even seductive and promiscuous. Merriam Webster offers the definition of the term “Jezebel” as “an impudent, shameless, or morally unrestrained woman.” People use “Jezebel spirit” in the same manner people outside the church might refer to a powerful woman as a “man-hater.” Many in the United States know the connotations of this derogatory term, and how it has been used to degrade strong women in leadership. Even if we don’t agree with the meaning or application of the term, we recognize how people can have a powerful emotional buy-in to the concept of man-hater both as a speaker and a recipient of that term. This principle operates in the same manner with the term Jezebel within the church and with many other terms, beliefs, and practices. It might be hard to trace the origins of every emotional and cultural response to “man-hater,” but we intuit and know its meaning even if we can’t identify the source of that intuition or knowledge. I can make the connections between a “jezebel” and “man-hater” because I have a relationship with two communities - American and Evangelical. I also have a relationship with the academic community, so I am accessing those connections here in this dissertation.

Within the indigenous framework, Wilson notes that *all* knowledge and thought are culturally situated and built up on a series of relationships, and because we cannot know all of the relationships that brought about that knowledge or thinking, “judgement of another’s viewpoint is inconceivable” (92). We do not listen to other people’s experiences or stories to judge, “but only to make new connections to ideas” (94). I share the stories in this dissertation as a way to make new connections to ideas. I ask that you trust me and my participants, reader.

Even though suspending judgement might be contrary to the critical fashion we are trained to approach research, when we are talking about cultures and communities, the relationships become more complex and ask us instead to puzzle over ideas that might be new to us or at least we might allow ourselves to gaze in a new way on old ideas. Please trust me that when we say an experience or belief is real for us, that it is very real. And not real in the naive sense of blissful ignorance, but in the nature of falling in love with someone. It is cerebral and embodied all at once. Its importance is based in the very power of that response rather than its provability. Many tangible effects can happen from this powerful response--lifestyle changes, geographic moves. Feelings of love can fade or change, much as the beliefs for my participants shifted, but the life-altering power of the experience of falling in love is undeniable. The same is true for the beliefs of my participants. Their intuitive knowledge and experience are embodied and real and had tangible effects. I ask you to read looking for new connections to ideas rather than judging if something is real or valuable.

## PRACTICE OF LISTENING

Throughout this project, from the beginning curiosities to developing some sort of cohesive narrative or findings, I engaged in the practice of listening. This practice extends to my participants, myself, and my dissertation itself.

### *Listening to Participants*

With commitments to working and dialoguing with my participants, I engaged in the practice of strategic contemplation as described by Royster and Kirsch in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. They describe research as a “lived process” that asks us to pay attention to both the

internal narratives and external embodied sense-based experiences in our research process (87). The authors note that this allows for researchers to “gain perspective from both close and distant views of a particular rhetorical situation or event” (89). Listening takes time, which is why I transcribed my interviews, so I could listen in a quiet moment while also reflecting on and paying attention to my recalled experiences and impressions during the moment of interviewing. Moments of trauma were shared in these interviews, and at times, my breath would be taken away as a story was told and even subsequent revisiting of that story in transcriptions and writing. Paying attention to the body is important in this vein of research, particularly with the topic itself relating to embodied expressions of sexuality. I explained this particular listening practice as part of my methodologies to my participants as it “reinforces the awareness of the importance of participants’ experiences and stories in the research process,” including their emotional and physical experiences during the interview (Goodson and Gill 37). I asked if they would also listen to their own embodied experience of the interview itself. Maddy at the end of her interview remarked, “I feel like I have purged something” after we both had teared up at the latter end of our time together, and I told her that her sharing was emotional and powerful for me also as a researcher and friend. As I listened to Sarah’s transcript, I found her insights even more powerfully applicable to my own life in the quiet relistening than I was able to experience during the interview.

### *Listening to the Body*

I have engaged in strategic contemplation as I listen to my own body and emotions throughout this time of research and writing. I felt simultaneously elated with sharing stories and memories with my participants and aggrieved at the pain felt and the long-term effects of the past

moments shared in their stories. I felt nauseous and depressed when rereading Evangelical purity and sexuality books. One of the books I use in this dissertation still contains my old teenage notes and underlines. Rereading them reminds me of the earnest determination of my younger self and the constant failure and self-loathing I felt in my inability to conform myself to those ideals. I have had to answer questions from others regarding the current status of my faith beliefs and have not known what to say. I am still in the unraveling process and the disorientation of that is just now passing in my life as I acknowledge I perhaps do not believe anymore and what role that belief or unbelief might play in my research and positionality.

### *Listening to the Dissertation*

During the composing stage of this dissertation, the pandemic of COVID 19 was happening (it may still be even now). As I write this, we are a month into Shelter in Place, and listening has taken on a whole other dimension as I am physically forced into isolation from my normal writing interventions - grad school friends, coffee shops, meetings with advisors. Even though I still have contact through social media and other technology, the loss of physical interaction is surreal, and I am still puzzled to put my finger on why that distance would impact such a solitary act as writing. I struggle to write some days as I find myself unable to do more than watch tv and keep my hands occupied by knitting.

In the middle of this pandemic and composing, I found out that my job for next fall is no more due to financial hardship related to COVID. I have never been a jaded academic, but I now wrestle with hopelessness as I try to finish this dissertation. I also feel guilt towards my participants for this hopelessness. I want to do justice with, through, and by their stories. While journaling, I found myself angry at so many things, an emotion that is atypical for me, so it

caused me to pay attention and contemplate the core of it. When my rant reached out to grab my work, a sudden compassion came over me for this dissertation, not specifically the participants, the project, or the composing process, but for this pile of paper and words. I am cautious to personify it, but these are strange times. My well of compassion led me to make a methodological commitment towards this body of words. They represent years of labor and internal searching, but they also represent a vulnerability, not even about myself, but for the process that this paper will go through to be complete. It will have to stand in judgement and be leaned down and shuffled around. It is powerless in this process as it cannot control which sentences to keep, the length of its pages, or even its own naming. My commitment is to speak kindly of my dissertation, to hold it lightly, and to try my best to do it justice. It has been my companion during this hard time right now, and it allows me to write my personal and professional hopelessness, fear, and anxiety upon it in all the spaces between words. I am not sure how much the body of the writer or the world events impinging upon deadlines and exigencies impact a body of work, but I operate out of a sense that they do quite a lot.

## STORYTELLING

Because of my methodological commitments and positionality, this dissertation uses both autoethnography and storytelling as a way to acknowledge and further contextualize implicit knowledge as well as the ways belief systems played a role in our day to day lives. With relying on my *own* intuitive and cultural knowledge, autoethnography is included throughout my dissertation as a means for contextualizing my perceptions of Evangelical culture. Boylorn and Orbe discuss the role of autoethnography and culture in the introduction to their anthology, *Critical Autoethnography*. Part of their purpose is to “...highlight the productivity inherent within



autoethnography as a means to enhance existing understandings of lived experiences enacted within social locations situated within larger systems of power, oppression, and social privilege.” (19). My own story complements those of my participants in further situating our experiences in larger Evangelical systems. I participate in confirming and listening to their experiences by being vulnerable with my own. Rex L. Crawley notes in his chapter “Favor: An Autoethnography of Survival,” autoethnography allows for “emancipation from the creative limitations of validity, reliability, and generalization” (222). Through sharing individual experiences, it allows us to “embrace intersubjectivity, emotionality, and lived experience, rather than trying to bury, deny, or defend it” (222). With my participants and I growing up burying, denying, and defending our individual stories and voices for the sake of attempting to fit in to our communities, creating a space for these stories to be shared out loud in this dissertation does its own unraveling work. The interviews themselves are acts of uncovering, accepting, and sharing our stories. Listening to our own stories and acknowledging them out loud is one of the major themes of this dissertation and is vital work for survival as will be seen in my participants’ stories. This dissertation builds upon the change it seeks to trace and document.

Storytelling is also a vital part of Evangelical culture and telling our stories here helps rewrite those stories we have been enculturated in. Nigerian Storyteller Ben Okri says

“In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly and unknowingly - in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.” (46)

This dissertation seeks to capture the impact of the stories told to us through testimonies, cautionary tales, parables, and Bible stories. Most importantly, it seeks to capture the stories we planted in ourselves in our attempts to write and rewrite ourselves into the larger story we wanted to be living in. Through uncovering these stories and acknowledging our perceived failure to live in them, we simultaneously uncover the larger cultural stories of power and control. My participants and I changed the stories we lived by through accepting the *real stories within ourselves* often with great cost, and it changed our lives.

## PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS

As I mentioned earlier, Maddy was my first interview. We split a lunch order of Chinese food as we sat on the carpet in my living room. Maddy is beautiful, stunningly so. She is also “spicy” as we like to joke but has a good dose of “wine mom” in her. She is adventurous and outgoing while also being nurturing and affectionate. Maddy and I went to church together for around ten years. She and her husband, along with her two children, were the youth ministers there for part of that time. Beyond our church ties, she and I also traveled in the same social groups, so I first-hand witnessed her story as it progressed over the years. She grew up in Michigan and attended private Christian schools. Her family was invested in church, but perhaps not as much as other families represented in the study. But with Maddy being the youngest and with a significant age gap from her siblings, she felt her family poured a lot of their attention and personal dreams into her. Family past failings were to be made right through Maddy’s personal choices, particularly around sexuality. Maddy’s life traveled familiar Christian paths of marriage, home, and children up until the last three years. During that time as her family dynamics shifted, her separated husband passed away. Maddy and I often muse on where life has taken us as we

both were going through separations at the same time. We both married young, and our somewhat parallel stories made the interview lean towards asking the why questions instead of the what ones. The interview also afforded the opportunity to hear her tell her story in the way she might want to tell it to an outside observer versus someone who walks in it day to day with her. I found her honesty with me and with herself stunning. She was able to articulate hard things and be gracious to herself in her realizations. Her presence makes you want to be free and unencumbered.

Ben was my second interview. He grew up in Oklahoma, and I remember him at 18 as tall with wavy red hair, an easy laugh, and a friendliness and excitement for life that immediately made any room he was in feel more like a party. He grew up in the Nazarene church, and his dad shifted from working in business to becoming a pastor when Ben was young. He was homeschooled for most of his education, only attending public high school near the end of his secondary education. I have only seen Ben in pictures on social media since we were 20. He is now “ripped” as some might name it, and is an architect living with his partner and two dogs in California. We have talked some over the last twenty years, but always faceless, which is how we also conducted our interview. We began our phone interview both musing about the wisdom and *c’est la vie* that came when we both turned 40. Ben is as deeply reflective as he is full of life. Between the lines of his interview, there was an active current of seeking understanding. His story flowed for almost 45 minutes straight after my first question. We laughed in spots and his vulnerability made me catch my breath in spots.

The other participant was Sarah who is vibrant and soulful. Like Ben, she was a part of the youth ministry I traveled with. I have not seen her in person since we both were 19 years old, but I remember her with a guitar in hand, eyes closed, and singing. She is still a singer and an

actress. She grew up in Kansas with a family that owned and traveled with a Christian circus. Because of the traveling, she was homeschooled while she was young with her later years attending a private school. Her family was heavily invested in ministry and social justice causes. Sarah was in ministry herself up until her late twenties. She has moved around pursuing her music career, and she now lives in Los Angeles. My interview with her took place over the phone. We had considered Zooming, but I found from my past phone and Zoom interviews that talking on the phone felt more natural, particularly with people whom I had not seen face to face in decades. Instead of the cautions we might feel addressing an unfamiliar face, we are able to find comfort in our unchanged voices. Sarah is thoughtful and longs to connect with others, which she does easily. Throughout the interview, she talked about how love has driven her actions throughout her life. Her self-awareness and commitment to loving others made her realizations, about herself and others, both sharp in insight but kind to her intentions.

Josh and James are brothers. Josh is the second oldest of ten children while James is the youngest. Due to their family's strong fundamentalist views, they were both homeschooled and deeply embedded into church community life. They both acknowledge the first five siblings had a much more controlling childhood, particularly in education. Josh never attended school while James did during his teen years after a significant intervention from relatives and his older siblings.

James is 21 years old, and his nickname, Sunshine, suits him well. He is always smiling and loves to dance, but he will also sit and talk for hours about life. He is a college student still trying to figure out exactly what he wants to do in life. He has talked about maybe taking some years to travel. We met while playing kickball, and he is one of those people who you find yourself deep in a conversation while others play flip cup around you. For the interview, we

decided to meet at a restaurant during happy hour. Our small table was loaded with food and drinks which made recording a bit more challenging as we negotiated passing silverware and attempting to eat.

James introduced me to his brother, Josh, for this project. Although we have never met in person, similar to James, quickly in our conversation, I felt like I knew him. The age difference between him and his brother shows up in his years of reflection on his difficult childhood. He has a successful contracting business and lives with his partner. For this paper, with much deliberation, I chose not to include James's full story. His experiences are counted among the numbers I share when I refer to homeschooling or broader experiences, but his more detailed story I plan to include in future work based on this project.

### **CHAPTER 3 - EMBODIED AND INTERNAL SEXUAL PURITY**

The definition of ‘sexuality’ according to Mirriam Webster is threefold: the condition of having sex, sexual activity, and the expression of sexual interest or receptivity. In this chapter, I will lean into the “conditions” of having sex and the subsequent sexual activity that is allowable within the Evangelical construct for not only physical sexual activity, but also internal thought life and desire. Whether you identify as Evangelical or not, Evangelical teachings on sexuality have a direct impact on both sexual and general culture in the United States, particularly in relationship to gender roles (Burack, Harris, Stetzer, Wong). We see this in politics with terms like “family values” and legislation devoted to fighting gay marriage with the rhetoric of “natural” sexual practices with marriage being between one man and one woman. Becoming acquainted with some of Evangelical history and teachings will lead to a greater understanding of how it is culturally infused and embedded in the ways we approach sexuality writ large. Evangelical sexuality teachings have historically sanctioned oppressive practices to the point of harming others and death.

In this chapter, I will share more in depth the particular “sexual literacy” developed by Evangelicals as well as the literacy events used to maintain and propagate it. I will show how these avenues of enforcement for sexual literacy impact social and political power and control more broadly. I share all of this in order to show (1) Evangelical sexual literacy is carefully thought out, heavily discussed, and has its own version of criticality; (2) the intense cultural conditioning my participants, myself, and others go through in relationship to sexuality; and (3) the deep cost of not following Evangelical sexual literacy and the high cost of change.

## WHY SEXUALITY?

Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes in their introduction to the edited collection, *Sexual Rhetorics*, begin with noting that sexuality is one of the “dominant filters for and zones of conflict through which we understand, negotiate, and argue through our individuality and our collectivity” (1). Sexuality is not only the lens through which we understand our individuality and collectivity, but it is also the site itself where these negotiations of who we are as individuals and how we relate to each other, both physically and existentially, take place. Alexander and Rhodes go on to define the role of sexual rhetorics then is to recognize and highlight the relationship between sexuality and power and how the complex relationship between those two forces impacts how identities are “created, categorized, and rendered as subjects constituted by and subject to power” (1). Sexual rhetorics seeks to “trace” the attempts to “disrupt and reroute the flows of power, particularly but not exclusively discourse power, as mediated through sex and sexuality” (1). This chapter seeks to highlight the relationship between sexuality and power and how that relationship uses individual sexual desires and identities as indicators of religious belief, lifelong relational fulfillment, community loyalty, and even eternal trajectory. I will also share the ways my participants embodied this power relationship and how they “disrupted and rerouted” this power in their own lives, often at great communal cost.

Jonathan Alexander in his separate book, *Literacy, Sexuality, and Pedagogy*, shows how literacy is also intertwined with sexuality and power. Sexual literacy, and the withholding of it, can lead to a lack of empowerment resulting from skewed knowledge and hidden connections between sexuality and power. Alexander defines “sexual literacy” as recognizing the conflation between sexuality and self, and critically engaging stories of sexuality to understand how they are controlled, and when necessary, how to resist controlling norms (5). To be sexually literate

means one has a clear sense of personal identity and relationship to sexuality, and is critically aware of the role power, discourse, ideology, and belief play in our collective and individual understandings of sexuality. With a robust sexual literacy, one is able to recognize and if desired, resist controlling norms. A complexity with this definition is the premise that the notion of “self” carries the same investment across communities and that norms are readily identifiable when examined with different cultural lenses. In the context of this project, I would argue that Evangelicals prescribe their own version of sexual literacy that subjects the self to communal and spiritual commitments while viewing that they are *already* openly resisting the controlling norms of secular society’s approach to sexuality. Evangelicals actively resist perhaps more mainstream versions of sexual literacy by restricting access to secular sexual content and information, encouraging individuals to keep themselves sexually “pure,” and intensely investing in enculturating young people into their communal version of sexual literacy. The focus on subverting self to scriptural guidelines and community as well as focusing on an active resistance to secular sexuality makes acquiring the sort of sexual literacy Alexander describes even more complicated as self is silenced and Evangelical norms are hidden under emotional imperatives to resist mainstream sexuality. This is important as Alexander notes, “how one learns about sex and sexuality in this [American] culture is complexly wrapped up in notions of citizenship...how one develops a literacy about sexuality is crucial to one’s understanding of important public debates, and hence participation in the democratic project” (4). With the increasing political power of Evangelicals, it is particularly important to understand their construction of sexual literacy in order to better understand the ways it shows up in our public political and social debates. Ironically, even with Evangelicals’ intense efforts to develop a controlled communal sexual literacy that includes a focus on subjugating self, many within the culture, as will be seen



with some of my participants' experiences, see their failed adherences to sexual guidelines as *individual* flaws instead of recognizing their sexual identities and practices as political and part of a much broader Evangelical system. They fail the community. The community does not fail them.

Alexander describes how the narrative construction and dissemination around sexuality is a “complex *literacy event*, evoking narrations of self, connections with others through complex discourses and political formations mediated through ideological investments” (1) (italics mine). Kirk Branch, in his article “What No Literacy Means,” also expands on how literacy events can not only be places where literacy is cultivated, but also sites of intentional withholding, resisting, or restricting literacy “as a tool of control, domination, and/or oppression” (53). He goes on to note that literacy denied becomes a “tool for the powerful” (54). As educators, we recognize the social and economic capital associated with literacy acquisition and the “political effectiveness of restricting literacy as a tool of social control,” but what about the individual capital derived from *intentionally resisting* literacy? (56). Within Evangelicalism, restricting and withholding secular sexual literacy helps maintain social and political power and control, but social capital for individuals is also gained when they individually *intentionally* choose to resist secular versions of sexual literacy. Secular sexual literacy is not only withheld, it is also encouraged that each person on an individual level also actively resist any occasions where sexual literacy might be gained.

### *Christian Sexual Literacy Events*

*It was the summer I turned thirteen, and I was at a Christian summer camp. On the second to last night, the girls gathered their sleeping bags for a group overnight in the lodge while the boys went camping in the dunes on the beach. This separation signaled to everyone*

*that we would be talking about sex and dating, which we were all giddy with excitement about as we laid out the grid of our fifty plus sleeping bags.*

*Before the “talk” began, they asked people if they had a question they wanted answered, to put it in a box located in the back of the room. At the time, there was a popular song called, Touch Myself by Divinyl. I knew about sex, but most of the activity around it was a bit hazy for me. I had heard of masturbation, but my friends did not talk in detail about sex as much as they talked about boys. We had no Google, and none of the Christian books for middle school age talked about it. I had heard that song and knew my parents didn’t like it if I sang it, but they never explained why. I began to put these two silences together. I put my question in the box- Is touching yourself masturbating?*

*The counselors began answering questions from up front. After around fifteen questions including the quintessential question, how far is too far. I waited for my question, but it never came. At the end of the night, they got somber and said they had a very important topic to talk about in the last question. In fact, the question was so serious that they had to call in the pastor (they just brought a man into the sacred women sex talk space--this was serious) to help answer the question. My heart was racing. The pastor came to the front of the room. I am sure they had to draw straws on who had to read the question out loud in the room. The pastor talked on and on about the seriousness of this question and the topic. We needed to be careful. But the whole time, I kept waiting--tell me what masturbation is, please! Finally, the pastor stepped aside after his dire admonishments. The counselors got back up only to announce it was lights out. It would be a while until I figured out exactly what exactly the term “masturbation” meant. Even though this night makes for a humorous story, at the time it gave me pause. It was clear through this one moment that certain things were not supposed to be talked about. Girls did not talk about*

*masturbation. Period. Even the counselors had to call a man in. I also knew I had no one to ask this question to because of the untouchable aspect of the topic. It made me feel untouchable that I wanted to know so much about it.*

Examining the framework of literacy events allows for the ways cultural spaces, and in particular, how activities outside of educational institutions impact literacy and/or sexual literacy with the express purpose of maintaining a system of control and uniformity. Alexandra Cavallaro describes in *Enculturation* “alternative sites” of rhetorical education outside of the classroom. They can often be places of intersectional literacy where “spirituality, literacy, and academic discourse” are brought together (2). She describes sites where LGBTQ people can learn to confront Evangelical Biblically based harassment while also recognizing that some Christians identify as LGBTQ. Even though she describes these rhetorical sites as positive, extracurricular rhetorical learning spaces, her observations also work in considering that Evangelicals also have similar alternative sites where they learn how to rhetorically use the Bible for said harassment and for other personal and communal regulatory teaching. Evangelical teachings restricting sexual literacy act as “complex literacy events” in “alternative sites” that are “tools for the powerful.”

The important thing about literacy events and alternative sites is that they offer space for all of the small, implicit, and covert ways sexual literacy is withheld and the ways gender norms are taught in order to maintain power constructs through community interactions. Professor of Religious Studies, Julie Ingersoll writes in her book, *Evangelical Christian Women*, about women in the Evangelical church and their experiences with gender norms. She describes, using Foucault’s terminology, the “subtle arrangements” and “little things” Evangelicals do to maintain gender norms. She says, “These often unspoken behavioral rules and requirements are harder to

document than the gendered nature of the material or ideological dimensions of culture, and they are particularly difficult for critics within the tradition to challenge because such criticism is made to seem petty” (109). These “little things” become such a part of everyday life that we do not notice them, but they are in fact, very powerful. I would echo her that it is hard to challenge these ‘literacy events’ as an insider because they seem so small and individually insignificant, but that evasive intangibility is also how they remain so powerful and prevalent. Ingersoll lists and describes these different events. Although it is lengthy, I list them here simply to show their prevalence:

1. “Small group meetings” (110) - One of the most powerful tools. Small group meetings are often broken up by gender and/or age with group emphasis supporting gender constructs (Ex. women- focus on care for children and support, while men focus on doctrine or theology).
2. “Gendered parachurch ministries” (110-112) These are often large national or global organizations, such as Promise Keepers, True Love Waits, Focus on the Family, and large gender-based conferences.
3. “Gendered social events” (112) These events include things such as, Father-son baseball games or “Mom’s Day Out.” They serve to create shared interests among gender groups while also creating social outlets for “home-school families.” (113).
4. “Less subtle social pressures” These are often implicit pressures, such as women being encouraged to or restricted to working with children rather than in adult leadership, and women being pressured to only speak to ‘pastor’s wives’ about problems vs. the pastor (113-4).

5. “We’re all family here” This imperative includes not speaking to outsiders about church ‘family’ problems with churches as a community at times “fitting profiles of dysfunctional and abusive families” (114-16)
6. “Inventing and (reinventing) the past” This shows up in cultural, local, and denominational spins on Christian history and theology as well as broader cultural and national history (116-8). (This also speaks towards the “Make America Great Again” political slogan that summons up a skewed image of America’s past).
7. “Gendered Evangelical material culture” For example, kitsch, bumper stickers, t-shirts, jewelry (think Precious Moments) (118-23))

Although Ingersoll’s list is thoughtful and broad reaching, there are also other powerful Evangelical literacy events, particularly those geared towards young people: youth groups, retreats or trips, vacation bible school, summer camps, missions’ trips, protests, Sunday school, dinner parties, and social media. Not to mention, the influence of attending church sometimes three times a week (twice on Sunday and once on a weekday) and having your entire social circle constructed from these communities. Sarah, one of my participants talked about the intersection of literacy events and the implicit expectations,

I was, I think, involved in two different purity ring ceremonies. And I was the kind of person who wanted to be pure and wanted to be good and wanted to have my life set aside for Jesus and I think I even considered being...you know...not getting married or not being with anyone for the rest of my life just because I think it was pretty obvious what was expected of me in that regard. There wasn’t much question there.

Every community has its ways of constructing culture and conveying community expectations and rules, and literacy events, such as ring ceremonies, are one tool for constructing and maintaining gender norms and restricted sexual literacies in Evangelical church cultures.

Elite Ben Yosef in the article, “Literacy and Power: The Shiyour as a Site of Subordination and Empowerment for Chabad Women” talks about the ways the shiyour, or what might be characterized as a religious women’s group, serves to reinforce and normalize traditional, patriarchal gender norms. She characterizes this group as a form of “soft dominance” a term borrowed from Carolyn Betensky. Male leadership does not promote oppression and dominance directly, but through guiding and sanctioning the women leaders of the group, their teachings are transmitted and reinforced through the group. This method is particularly powerful as the guidelines and teachings are being given in “peer to peer” interactions where the power dynamic is subtle and hidden. Both teacher and learner share in the struggle together, and this strengthens the communal aspect of practice, particularly those practices that are challenging, such as sexual purity. This sort of “soft dominance” shows up in Evangelical literacy events and in the “little things” where communities themselves maintain the power structure through relationships, and in particular for young people, through guidance in future life planning.

One tool used in soft dominant control of sexual literacy is discourse and as Alexander delineates - what discourse is allowed, the ability to name, and the knowledge to be able to participate in important social and political conversations (42-47). Citing from Foucault and others, he notes that discourse, particularly around sexuality, is established through home communities (42). He notes our understandings of sexuality are important as they also mediate our discourse outside the classroom in education, public, and political domains and how our understandings tie together our notions of sexuality and our notions of self and story. Alexander

works to move the conversation of sexuality to the larger questions with pointing out that anytime there is a sexual constraint placed on a person or people group, or as I might add, people intentionally resisting sexual literacy, the question needs to be asked, “whose interests are served?” (185). This question pointing towards the larger systems echoes David Bloome when he talks about the importance of looking beyond simply ‘what’ discourse is saying and instead, ““The question to ask is who is doing what, with whom to whom, to what consequence, when and where”” (Bloom and Carter (238-9) qtd in Bloome 144-5). Alongside looking at the individual beliefs and the discourse itself being shared and followed in a given moment, we look towards the larger questions. With individuals operating out of sexual constraint and an intentional or unintentional lack of sexual literacy, it is important to ask: “*whose interests are served?*”

### *Sexuality as Dominant Marker of Faith*

Some of the most powerful discourse in Evangelical sexuality is embedded in teachings on purity. Those purity teachings and the subsequent embodiment of “purity” are some of the dominant means for investing young people in maintaining the Evangelical power structure within *themselves* by teaching them to intentionally resist sexual literacy. Evangelical sexual “purity” is defined on a most basic level as not having penetrative sex outside of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, but the scope of what is considered “pure” is much broader than simply intercourse. For some of my participants, being pure meant not kissing until your wedding day. But for many, the notions of control necessarily developed to maintain abstinence created lifelong maps of self-doubt and guilt that carried far beyond initial sexual activity and into marriages and long-term relationships. The question, “How far is too far?” haunts youth groups and young people, but at the same time there is some shame in asking this question because it is

*supposed* to not be rule driven, but heart driven. You are supposed to *want* to remain pure in all of your internal desires and thoughts, not just on the outside with staying on the right side of the purity line.

The same notions of control and the system of programming the mind used to maintain purity are said to be used to control other behaviors and the relationships to outside (secular) influences as well. Subsequently, the actions of the body demonstrate the ways you control your mind and heart writ large, and ultimately, determine salvation, community belonging, and act as a witness to the world. With sex being a crucial and embodied act, sexuality, in its myriad of forms, then becomes one of the *dominant markers* of Christian teaching and effectiveness in the world. It becomes a tangible, visible outward symbol of internal control and power. Elizabeth Elliot in one of the most famous books on sexual purity, *Passion and Purity*, depicts the urgency of the relationship between sex, control, and Christianity, “The love life of a Christian is a crucial battleground. There, *if nowhere else*, it will be determined who is Lord: the world, the self and the devil, or the Lord Christ” (12) (Italics Mine). The subtitle of Elliot’s book is: *Learning to Bring your Love Life Under Christ’s Control*. Control is an intricate part of purity, but as the Elliot quote inquires...who is in control? The implications in her question by pairing “the self and the devil” demonstrate that letting *yourself* control your body and sexuality (because you and your body want bad things) is directly tied to the devil. Instead, the implied best option for control is the Lord Christ. The trouble with giving control to an intangible Christ is specifying what modern day-to-day life looks like with highly translated and interpreted indirect biblical teachings based in historical settings from thousands of years ago. This gap between historical rules and beliefs with modern practice creates a space for church leaders and



social and political powers to enact their own teachings that help one control the body and, ultimately, whole lives.

With many other aspects of religious life being hard to quantify, sexuality can become an easy way to outwardly demonstrate your faith. Mark Regenerus describes “Sex is a sphere of human behavior high in religious applicability...it is a topic that has more religious relevance—or is more clearly addressed in most religious traditions—than many other topics.” (7). Regenerus describes sexuality as a site that is easier to define in binary terms. You are either married or you are not. You are sexually active, or you are not. Sexuality is easier to define than how we spend our money or how we love our neighbors. Donna Freitas, a researcher at the Center for Religion and Society at Notre Dame, in her book, *Sex and the Soul*, did a study of college students’ sexual beliefs and practices across seven different colleges and universities which fell into four different categories: Evangelical, Catholic, non-religious private, and public. Of the people groups represented in her study, she found that only Evangelicals closely tied sex with their belief systems and had subsequent very clear distinctions in their sexual behavior than other spiritual systems (14). Of the 2500 students who took the survey, she notes “With one exception, *only* Evangelical students mentioned God when they wrote about hooking up” (121). Sex dominates the landscape in more clearly defining and making public your religious beliefs than many other actions. She notes, “Among Evangelicals, the quest for purity is always a religious quest” (92). Being abstinent on a college campus stands out and the heart of the quest to maintain purity is one’s religious beliefs. Sexuality more clearly shows you are in or you are out and whether or not you have the internal control it takes to be a “good” Christian overall.

Religion Scholar, Julie Ingersoll in her book *Evangelical Christian Women*, describes how the body acts as an intermediary or an “in between” in this binary thinking, which is also

one of the reasons it is perhaps the most contentious site for Christian teaching and people. The body is both sacred and of this world. Ingersoll describes how Christians, with a loss of a sense of place, grounded sacred symbols and rituals in the human body itself. She defines ritual as part of what “marks off the real world from ‘the way things should be’” with the latter grounded in sanctioned sexuality maintained through a spiritual relationship and the real world being composed of the flesh body and its urges. With gender playing a significant role in Evangelical sexuality, the gendered body works to control and mark “boundaries between saved and lost with idealized gender behavior” (124). When all of a Christian’s life is “ordered by gendered requirements, life itself becomes the performance of ritual in the space of the human body” (124). With this way of thinking, everyday gendered activities, as represented in various literacy events, become infused with meaning and purpose. Evangelical purity teachings work their way from everyday activities and events into the body as well as desire and thought.

It is a challenge to superimpose rigid binaries of good and bad upon a body that resides “in between” sacred and flesh, and this often leads to deep confusion and a sense of failure when binaries are not maintained. In fact, it is nearly impossible to maintain them as they rely upon non-binary evidence in the body, mind, and heart, so following these teachings inevitably leads to confusion and failure. Linda Klein in her book *Pure* interviewed people who grew up in Evangelicalism and eventually left. She noted, “They hold on to the good/bad binary they were taught growing up: they just swap everything around in it...but most of my interviewees eventually have come to the conclusion that the binary itself is the problem...lives are just lives.” (144). One of her interviewees describes the process of coming to that conclusion and said, “To lose those things, it just felt devastating. It was like grieving a death. I felt completely lost, destroyed, confused. What do you do when there’s no more absolutes? What do you fill that up

with? How can you know anything? I'm left with this world and I don't know *anything*" (144). Failing the binaries brings confusion and a sense of failure, but also coming to the realization that the binary itself is the problem brings another layer of loss and disorientation.

### *Christian Sex Books Background*

*During my own teen years, I struggled with these binaries and enacting daily control over my life, and within this struggle, I devoured Christian purity books. Even then, I recognized that I turned to them again and again as almost a self-brainwashing that I prayed would overcome my struggles. Reading them was like a daily meditation. If I just read the words and stories enough, I would be able to reprogram myself so my inherent desires would line up with the purity demanded of me. I read I Kissed Dating Goodbye by Joshua Harris with scholarly intensity, committing myself to the courtship dating model he exhorted. My favorite author was Elizabeth Elliot, who wrote the iconic book, Passion and Purity, as well as many other books about womanhood, purity, and marriage. Her story is that she met her husband during college years when they both decided to become missionaries. After their marriage, he went overseas by himself and was murdered. Her claim to fame is that she went back to where he was murdered and became a missionary there herself. This story gave her a platform for many books on spiritual guidance. Even though she was only married a short time, her sacrifice of returning to where her husband was murdered became a sort of emblem for the kind of marriage one could strive for. The same discipline and self-sacrifice she exhibited in her marriage she attests to the development of those qualities during her time as a single person in maintaining her purity. This correlation between discipline during purity years with later self-sacrifice and faithfulness in the marriage is common in purity books. I was not very good at discipline, and I questioned my*

*faithfulness when everything felt like a constant struggle. I thought something was wrong with me, and that I was deeply flawed.*

*As I look through my teenage purity books for this project, I see my highlights and notes in the margins. At times when I read back through them and see my young desires on display, I get nauseous and feel my chest tighten. I remember wanting to just be so good. I walked around in a constant state of anxiety. I swore off dating again and again, commitments I failed which heaped greater guilt and anxiety. Seeing these notes and my new notes beside them makes me feel upended. I do not feel relief as one might suppose. Instead, I feel bewildered that I could think so differently now and how that young girl could never have imagined where I would be today. How do we know we do not operate all the time in these sorts of off-key ideas? How do I know the mantras I live by now are any better than the ones I read in these books and committed to memory?*

In this section, I will talk about Christian purity books, delving into Elliot's and Harris's works. I will speak towards their direct link and impact in teaching and supporting Evangelical sexuality rules and practices, but the books also appear throughout the rest of this chapter as evidence for some of the various teachings, rules, and beliefs proffered regarding purity and sex. With so much implicit knowledge being hard to quantify and with origins and sources difficult to pinpoint, purity texts offer some tangible and concrete examples of instruction, and they are important tools Evangelicals use to instruct and construct restrictive sexual and gendered boundaries and binaries, particularly for young people. Through examination of these texts, we are able to see some of the rules and ideals that construct and undergird Evangelical sexuality teachings. Religious professor, Amy DeRogatis, focuses on the role of Evangelical sex texts in maintaining Evangelical core beliefs in her book *Saving Sex*. She notes that Evangelical sexuality

books fall into two dominant categories: (1) Purity books, such as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris, which provide a framework for young women (by far and away this category of books are written specifically for women) for the years leading up to marriage (2) while the other category of books act as marital sex manuals for after marriage, such as the widely read, *The Act of Marriage*, by Tim and Beverly LaHaye. DeRogatis notes that the majority of these texts are written and distributed by “white, male, married Evangelicals connected either to megachurches or to national organizations such as Dr. James Dobson’s Focus on the Family” and “support a theological and social worldview that values chastity prior to heterosexual marriage and the establishment of a biblically ordered family with the father as the leader and the mother as a complimentary helpmate” (2). The texts directly tie together ideas of “natural” sexuality with biblical values and “traditional” gender norms. She also notes that these books and manuals provide explicit instruction...sometimes with “excruciating detail” but most importantly, they also are “committed to larger theological and social agendas” (3). Evangelical sexuality books use teachings focused on the physical site of the body as the means for reinforcing deeper agendas related to Evangelical community, theology, and societal participation.

The two veins of books, purity/pre-marriage and sex manual/post- marriage are linked together in that following the teachings of one when you are young promises to lead to the blissful, passionate marital sex described in the other. DeRogatis notes that while pre-marriage books are designed to cultivate purity and repress physical desires, marital manuals promise, “True Christians, who interpret the Bible correctly, have frequent and mutually satisfying marital sex” (69). By fulfilling your pre-marital commitments to pure sexuality, you earn an amazing, loving sex life. Satisfying is just the bare minimum promised with marital sex which is often characterized as almost porn level quality as described by Jessica Johnson, a Professor of

Anthropology and Women's Studies, in her book, *Biblical Porn*. She writes about the ministry of Mark Driscoll, a mainstream pastor who led a church of 13,000 that had satellite locations in five states. She describes a famous sermon series he did on a book in the Bible called Song of Solomon, which Driscoll credits for "congregational growth and cultural reformation." (32). She quoted Driscoll commenting on this sermon series, "'apparently a pastor using words like 'penis' and 'oral sex' is unusual, and before you could say 'aluminum pole in the bedroom,' attendance began to climb steadily.'" He attributes congregational growth to an interest in marital sex, and also attributes success to what he views as a growth in sex itself, "a lot of people got engaged, and young wives started showing up with big baby bellies, a trend that has continued unabated ever since" (32). Johnson describes the series as "extolling the virtues of marriage, foreplay, oral sex, sacred stripping, and sex outdoors" all of which Driscoll claims is backed by scripture (32). DeRogatis says these sorts of sexual maxims associated with spirituality put pressure on couples that if they are not having a sexually satisfying life, it is caused by a past or current spiritual failure. These books are used throughout the rest of this project as primary texts, but also to act as evidence for all of the "small things," literacy events, and implicit knowledge developed in Evangelical culture.

## THE RULES

The way sexuality rules are practiced and enforced are nuanced within different denominations and churches, but many Christian groups share the same core beliefs regarding sex. I recognize there are exceptions to these core rules and beliefs, but the ones listed below directly apply to my participants. Some of the almost common knowledge rules and beliefs regarding Christian sexuality are as follows: (1) Sex is designed by God to take place in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage. (2). Prior to marriage, sexual abstinence is expected and leads to a

happier and more satisfying relationship, and premarital sex leads to hardship and consequences;

(3) Sexuality is an indicator of faith and can impact your eternal relationship with God. I will begin with the first rule, examining the ways heteronormative norms are enforced and disseminated while also looking at the ways same-sex desire is silenced. The latter two rules are often clearly defined in some places, such as purity books and sex manuals, but I will also demonstrate the ways these particular rules are community reinforced through implicit understandings in the following section.

### *LGBTQIA+*

The Evangelical belief in a monogamous, heterosexual marriage is almost common knowledge in American culture. This shows up in the erasure of nonheteronormative experiences, destructive stereotyping, and narratives of being “saved” from same-sex desire and homosexual lifestyles. These beliefs and practices are still in full force today with Evangelicals lobbying against gay marriage and the ongoing battles over gender neutral restrooms. The broader culture in the US during the 80s and 90s echoed this erasure in many ways, which further reinforced Evangelical teachings on heteronormativity. Before I begin, I acknowledge there is a vast amount of research into the theology behind and the ongoing destructive history of Evangelical teachings on anything out of the heteronormative “family values” structure, but in particular there is a pointed and painful relationship between the Evangelical church and LGBTQIA + community that continues today (with Evangelicals being the destructive force in that relationship). With the large corpus of information in mind, I *briefly* touch on Evangelicals relationship to heteronormativity based on the experiences of my participants.

Even though Evangelical beliefs about homosexuality are intensely addressed on the political front and in broad strokes depicting it on the kinder end as “abnormal” and on the

hateful end of discourse as “deviant,” it is rarely discussed on an individual personal level within church communities as something congregants or believers might be experiencing. In particular, there is a silence among teachings directed at young people. One participant, Ben noted of his experience,

“And I don't know. I didn't realize what that was, but there was an attraction there at that age looking back now. And so, starting in, you know in young teens, there was an attraction there. I just...I didn't know any gay people. I didn't know what gay was. You know, I was so sheltered by it, and you know you dated girls and got married and you had babies and you didn't have sex till you got married and you know blah blah blah and so I, you know, just kind of naturally thought that's what happened.”

The intrinsic heteronormative narrative surrounding Ben made it difficult to even name what he was experiencing. Alexander talks about the power of discourse and the literacy wrapped up in being able to name things. In particular, he discusses Foucault's work around sexual discourse in *The History of Sexuality*. Alexander sums up, “...the call to articulate and tell the story around your desires and thus your identity, has linked (in the West) a sense of one's sexuality with a sense of one's identity - so much so that that the two are at times hardly distinguishable: *we are our sexuality*” (42). The Evangelical solidification in the identity of being heterosexual and the expected investment in the trajectory of marriage is so predominant that it works cyclically in individuals creating a story within themselves that fits with the expected identity and fashioning personal desires to fulfilling that identity in a way that even causes differing desires to be indistinguishable and unnamable. Initially, my participants did not even recognize their desires as “different” in a way to even feel shame about them. The heteronormative story was so predominant that any same sex desires were initially interpreted through the lens of



heteronormativity. It is only with later reflection that these emerging desires and the molding of those desires to fit the heteronormative narrative are able to be recognized. Sarah notes,

I think because I always did have an attraction to men, I just am someone who loves humans in general and I don't really honestly think or care about their gender. But because I was able to fall in that category [straight], the thought that I might be attracted to women or ever be able to fall in love with one or anything other than a man never occurred to me because it wasn't an option for me and I was able to kind of still fall into that category of being straight.

Sarah's ability to fit in the identity categorization of "straight," which I would argue is the expected "norm" within Evangelicalism, made it difficult for her to even conceptualize or recognize same sex attraction as an option for her sexuality.

Being straight and the expectation of heteronormativity is such a given that rarely in purity and marriage books is being LGBTQIA+ discussed *at all*. Different sexual orientations are not in the realm of consideration, and even sharing or discussing same sex attraction (sex acts are even farther from discussion or possibility) is taboo as will be reflected in some of my participants' stories. With my observations about the lack of addressing LGBTQIA+ in the literature for young people, I reached out informally to some acquaintances I knew had grown up in Evangelicalism to inquire if anyone had encountered or remembered purity teachings that addressed having non-heteronormative feelings or desires. One person said, "I always felt like it was treated as being so shameful that it was beyond the realm of possibility. At least in my church. 'We don't need to touch on that bc you're not THAT sinful, right, that we would need to address it?'" Another acquaintance attempted to make sense of the erasure of different sexual orientations,

I don't remember any of the purity culture books I read mentioning homosexuality, which is telling. The books are aimed at kids who are already "saved," so they assume that obviously whoever reading it isn't homosexual. Also, I think Evangelicals don't know what to do with Christians who say they "struggle" with homosexuality. I feel like it's treated like such a huge sin that it's beyond the scope of a book on teenage dating. It's simpler and easier to avoid talking about it. To imply that the reader could possibly be experiencing same sex attraction is almost insulting.

And yet another comment on erasure and its impact on recognition and naming, "It was just completely erased. No mention. I liked girls from early on but didn't recognize it for what it was because it simply didn't exist as an option I had ever heard of." My informal inquiry into the role of purity literature in addressing same sex attraction echoed my participant's experiences with the broader lack of framework for these desires. One person directly addressed some of the most influential purity books, "It was just that heteronormativity was so powerful. Books like Elizabeth Elliot "Passion and Purity" and Joshua Harris' "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" just really hammered home that there was ONE way to do relationships, and that way was hetero (and courtship, abstinence until marriage, etc.)." Being heterosexual was such a powerful assumption that it was difficult for my acquaintances or participants to even recognize their own desires as something that would fall outside that particular identity.

In many ways, it was the attachment of identity to sexual desire that contributed to the prohibition of acknowledging same-sex attraction within Evangelical circles. Alexander discusses anthropologist, Gilbert Herdt's cultural paradigms of Western sexual ideas. The paradigm that attached identity to sex acts arose with the science of sexology and the labeling and categorizing of sex acts, which led to terms such as heterosexual and homosexual. This then

led to sex acts becoming markers of who someone was as a person. As Alexander puts it, “*acts* that were once condemned under Christian-influenced legal paradigms become constituent *characteristics* of people who did them. If one performed homoerotic acts, one then *became* a homosexual” (39). The inability to name or recognize same sex desire as well as the fear of being labeled as homosexual when they did acknowledge it within Evangelical circles further contributed to the silence and silencing around desire.

Even though the idea of same-sex desire was silenced, the repulsion towards the label of homosexual was widely acknowledged and known within Evangelical circles. The lack of a safe space for personal recognition of same sex desire is compounded with hyperbolic stereotyping of gay people to an extreme of deviance, which further created a destructive distance and guardedness towards same sex desires or any person or group who might also identify as homosexual. Examples of this extremity are found in small comic-book style publications called *Chick Tracts*. It is a company which over the past fifty plus years has produced comic-like tracts to hand out to young people. Informally, several people told me they had seen and read these tracts growing up and even today in 2020 are handed out on the college campus in which I currently study. In 2015, Chick Publications had published over 250 unique tracts with 100 still in print and available in 100 different languages (“ChickComics.com”). One of these publications, which is still available, is entitled, *The Gay Blade*. The tract focuses on the story of the city of Sodom (which some speculate is where the word “sodomy” first originated) in the book of Genesis in the Bible. The city had such great sinfulness that God wanted to destroy it. He sent two angels to save one man, Lot, and his family, who still followed God’s laws. The two male angels came to Lot’s home, and the city dwellers rioted because they wanted the two angels for sexual pleasure. Instead, Lot offers them two virgin women (obviously problematic in its own

right), but the town's people refuse because they specifically desire the male angels. This stands as an example of the wickedness prevalent in this city which God ultimately destroys later that same night. This story has been used across Evangelicalism to demonstrate the level of perversion, even to the point of violence, people can reach if they give into their sexual desires, particularly same-sex desires. The *Gay Blade* uses this story and compares the actions of Sodom's citizens in their attempted assault on the angels to modern day with gay rights protests and gatherings (see below).

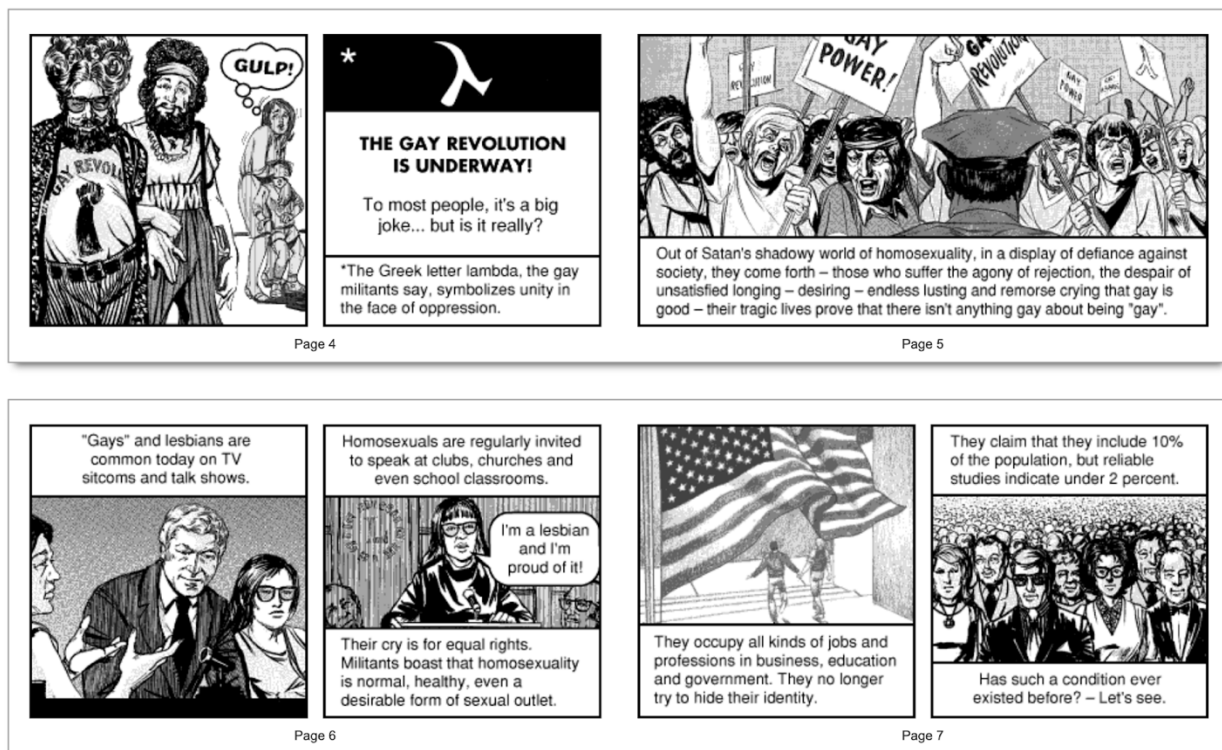


Figure 1: Image from The Gay Blade

It is clear that these tracts are an extreme depiction, but they demonstrate some of the material that was and is still being given to young people. Even if the Evangelical readers cynically and critically read these tracts, it still contributes to normalizing the portrayal of same sex desire as

deviant and any moderation of this extreme is internally credited as compassion towards gay people.

When different sexual orientations were discussed in a less extreme version than *Chicktracts*, it was typically talked about as a cautionary tale or as a part of someone's testimony in overcoming or being saved from being gay. One of my participants, Sarah, remembers her parents taking in a gay man who was dying from AIDS,

...at that time, they would say that he was homosexual and involved in the gay lifestyle and he had gotten AIDS because he had been very promiscuous, and he was dying. I don't remember much about that...I think my parents kind of protected me from what was going on with that, but I remember somebody being sick in our guest room. But I didn't really know anything about it, but I did later on understand what was going on. So that's kind of ...I kind of grew up with this idea that he was being punished for being gay by getting sick because he had chosen this sinful lifestyle.

Even with Sarah's parents on the kinder end of the way Evangelicals might treat someone who is gay by caring for him in his sickness, they made clear to Sarah that his sickness and subsequent death were his punishment for his promiscuous gay lifestyle. The question about whether or not God punishes gay people, even with sickness and death, remained with her into adulthood.

When I was 19, I lived in Colorado Springs while I worked with a local ministry for teens. As part of this organization, we were required to attend (even in my youthful zeal, I would not have chosen this church) New Life Church, a mega-church of 14,000 members on a 60\$ million-dollar campus with a head pastor named, Ted Haggard. According to his personal website, Haggard was the President of The National Association of Evangelicals from 2003--06. During that time, he and his association lobbied against the legalization of gay marriage. In 2006,

a man came forward saying Haggard had paid him for sexual relations and for drugs. Once this story came out, after an initial denial, Haggard finally admitted it was true. He stepped down from his ministry and began a month-long intensive therapy with other pastors. During this short time, he claims he was healed from his homosexual desires, which he attributed to early trauma from sexual abuse. This theme of childhood abuse leading to same sex desires and the imperative that those desires can be healed are particularly destructive beliefs in the Evangelical community.

Another prominent leader in the anti-gay movement who likewise attributed his history of homosexual feelings to abuse from which he later was subsequently healed was Sy Rogers. He was the founder and leader of Exodus International, a forerunner in the anti-gay movement particularly dominant during the late 80s. His message was that all homosexual relationships were sinful, but that God could help people choose not to be gay if they desired. God could redeem them from their sin and desires. Rogers, in an autobiographical article entitled “The Man in the Mirror,” describes how he once identified as homosexual and transsexual, which he later attributed to early in life trauma and abuse. After his early adult years identifying as gay, he decided to leave the gay lifestyle and community after he became a Christian. He wrote the book, *The Man in the Mirror* about his journey from considering sex change surgery to becoming saved, straight, and married to a woman. The article he wrote begins, “Imagine- me married!” He was somewhat effective in his ministry due to his milder approach towards gay people and same sex desires versus what many had experienced with the sorts of teachings seen in *Chicktracks*.

At the same time, the movement he founded, and others like it, work to “cure” gay people through salvation which is particularly destructive with claiming same-sex desires are a choice and often the result of early trauma. His ministry during the late 80’s had a brief, powerful

impact with the rise of AIDS, with Sy Rogers noting that some people were literally “scared straight.” Equating homosexuality with early sexual abuse and trauma is a common trope. My participant, Ben also struggled with the correlation of abuse and homosexuality in his own life, “whether the [sexual] tendencies I had that were then expounded with body dysmorphia, looking to men, with being molested as a kid, with liking it or so I thought at the time...whatever all those things and for a long time I told myself that's what made me gay.” Ben took decades to accept that it was not his sexual abuse that led to his being gay. Rogers’s ministry is just one example of the many over the last forty years devoted to gay conversion therapy which furthers feelings of failure and self-hatred for people like Ben with thinking being gay is something that can be fixed...you are just not strong enough to be fixed. Today, the organization, The Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity, provides a listserv of therapists who will work with clients who according to their website experience “unwanted homosexual attractions.”

With the Evangelical viewpoint on same-sex desire ranging from *chicktracts* to gay conversion therapy as well as the silence around non-heteronormative lifestyles, individuals are further isolated from sharing their desires with others in their local church communities. Ben eventually came to recognize his same-sex feelings in the 8th grade when while riding his bike, he stumbled upon some pornographic magazines hidden in a field. The pornography depicted relationships between men and women, but also men and men. He notes, “So that started a whole thing as well. So you know and of course I couldn’t talk about it and I did feel bad about it. I felt guilty, but at the same time, it was kind of like crack. I couldn’t quit.” Once he was able to identify his feelings for the same sex, he felt trapped and isolated in those feelings,

So interesting time. Sexually just very confused. And no one to talk to about it. There wasn't anybody to talk to that I knew who wouldn't just go look at me and tell me I was

going to hell. That would be the first thing, you know. I just didn't need that. That's not what I needed, you know. I felt like that [he was going to hell] anyway.

He goes on to describe the toll isolation took, the debilitating fear of getting found out, and the lies he told for acceptance, which he said led to living two separate lives for over twenty years (talked about further in Chapter 4). When I asked him in the interview what he would want to tell a younger version of himself, he recommended they find someone outside the community they could talk to who is able to listen to their story and not condemn their desires and possibly even offer another version of what life might look like apart from heteronormativity. The silencing of same sex desires contributed to Ben experiencing deep shame that often manifested in body dysmorphia and living a destructive, "scary" as he termed it, lifestyle for many years.

#### IMPLICIT UNDERSTANDINGS AND COVERT MESSAGES

As seen in the story of Sarah and Ben, instead of directly discussing rules or guidelines regarding sexual orientation, often it was comments and implicit understandings developed at an early age that guided their inner landscape. Linda Klein notes "the more powerful, and far more prevalent, messages are covert." They show up as

shaming attitudes embedded into everyday language, shaming lessons slipped into stories, shaming treatment felt by those who are being shamed and observed by those who fear they will be shamed *next*. Sometimes you can be in the room when these covert messages are relayed and not even hear them. They are *that* commonplace. (21).

She goes on to say that if the messages don't hurt you directly, you are much less likely to hear them. And if they *benefit* you, they are even harder to hear. These covert messages certainly are seen in relationship to same-sex desire, but they are also intensely prevalent in *all* teachings regarding sexuality. For many of my participants and myself, these messages regarding sexuality



were embedded into us unknowingly during childhood and early adolescence, and as we aged and found some of them wounded us, we began to see them more clearly for what they were. It is hard for people outside the faith to sometimes hear these coded and implicit messages in a way where their impact makes sense, wondering how they could ever have been believable, but as Klein said these messages are powerful, prevalent, covert, slipped in, and commonplace.

In this section, I will discuss some of these messages, particularly those that impacted my participants and myself. The specific messages I will discuss are as follows: (1) Purity begins in the mind and heart, which requires vigilant control of your inner voice and thought life; (2) Purity before marriage will impact the success of your future marriage and life; and (3) Sexuality can impact your salvation and relationship to the Christian community.

#### *Purity starts in the Mind and Heart*

*The words, “save me,” populate my numerous teenage journals which now fill a trunk in my bedroom. I was an avid journaler and wrote several pages a day. During the first two years out of high school, I wrote almost a journal book every month. My imploring was not about my salvation with Christ; I was confident that I believed. “Save me” applied to my sexuality and desire for a relationship. I did not understand why I seemed to struggle more than others. I felt something was wrong with me. It was not just a physical struggle, though that was a part of it, but I knew that I wanted connection. I knew that romantic love did something different inside of me. I had felt it. And I had felt the guilt that it meant so much to me. My heart should not be so easily swayed. I needed to control it. It is hard to capture how intense this longing was to NOT feel desire for that connection, and instead feel my relationship with God was enough for me to be happy. I was drowning in this struggle and could not understand why God would not just save me.*

During my “save me” years, I had not ‘technically’ broken any rules. I was still ‘good’ and had not had sex. My ongoing struggle was with my interior thought life. Purity is not only a set of rules to follow to control the physical body, it requires a vigilance in keeping your mind and heart “pure” from sexual desire and immorality. Keeping your mind and heart pure often relies on being set- apart and undefiled from the world. It is an expectation that, if necessary, one will remove oneself from influences outside the Christian faith, and every effort will be taken to not become “defiled” or impure through sexual images, ideas, thoughts, or influences. “It [purity] is a total system of maintenance and surveillance of sexual desires based on daily rituals” (DeRogatis 29). In order to maintain purity, on a daily basis, one must not allow sexually explicit or impure thoughts or material in their lives, and if necessary, young people must remove themselves from contexts where this is happening, such as we saw with the story in the Introduction chapter with the student leaving class during the movie *Her* due to scenes of a sexual nature. Joshua Harris in one of the defining books of the purity movement, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* depicts the heart in this way, “picture guarding your heart as if your heart were a criminal tied in a chair who would like to break free and knock you over the head” (141). You have to stand guard, not only for what is happening, but for what *might* happen if the criminal breaks free. Even more challenging than staying away from impure things, one must try to anticipate or survey where these encounters might *potentially* happen and do everything in your power to avoid them.

Hence, many young Evangelical people hoping to maintain their purity *intentionally* restrict sexual literacy or opportunities where sexual literacy might be gained. For example, they might restrict engagement with secular sexual education courses, rated R movies, conversations in public or in friend groups, and access to the internet in general so as to avoid accidental

encounters with sexual material and to restrict opportunities for temptation. All of these examples, and many more, carry the potential to defile the mind or embed impure thoughts.

Teachings related to outside influences being harmful and defiling, and the need to control your thought life and keep it pure are based upon many verses in the Bible. For example, in the book of Philippians 3 and 4, two sets of verses encourage,

...keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things (Philippians 3: 17-19).

This verse depicts a strong, almost oppositional and hostile, insider vs. outsider binary. It encourages, keep your focus on those who are like us...Christians. The others who do not believe like us or who are “outside” are, heartbreakingly and “with tears,” our enemies. The verse goes on to describe destruction as the end point for those who are not Christians, and that the thing that controls their decisions and who they are is their “stomach.” The “stomach” is often related to bodily desires and the verse implies a relationship between the urges of the body with destruction and shame. Linda Klein notes of the women she interviewed who grew up with purity teachings, “Based on our nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia, one might think that my childhood friends and I had been to war. And in fact, we had. We went to war with ourselves, our own bodies, and our own sexual natures, all under the strict commandment of the church” (8). To not become the enemy or live in destruction, we need to control the “stomach” or the body and not focus on earthly needs. This requires a battle like effort, which is not even implied, it is explicitly demanded. Earthly things could even be the need to eat (the stomach again), for physical affection, and for sleep. These things are very temporary in the Christian worldview,

and instead, what is important is the spiritual, the things we cannot see, and the potential destruction that awaits you if you do not live in vigilance. You are at war and the enemy can not only kill your body, but your spiritual self. And the enemy you are at war with is your very own body.

To avoid this potential destruction and combat the needs of the body, the mind must particularly focus on heavenly, otherworldly things. The second set of verses in Philippians go on to say what Godly minds should be set upon, “...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8). It is not specific what counts as pure, noble, or lovely, but this verse and the one in the prior paragraph are side by side to complement one another, so it begs the comparison between the urges of the body being bad, and a pure mind as being good. When you listen to your body, bad things happen. When you set your mind to only focus on good, pure, noble, and lovely things and not listen to the body, you will be good, and through this goodness and controlling the body, be able to stay pure. Controlling the body is about controlling the mind, and in order to control it in a particular bent, one must eliminate those things that would make that control more difficult. Instead, focus on only what is good, which biblically is broad and somewhat subjective - noble, good, pure, lovely. The subjectivity of those words leaves the specifics of what is to be focused on and what is to be resisted to be defined by local churches and Evangelicalism more broadly.

Purity texts, particularly those designed for women, often correlate fairytale like images and terminology with purity, which further distances what is ideal, good, and pure desire from real and embodied desire. It further enforces the spiritual and physical divide except now the spiritual carries correlations with fantastical love. Although there is no biblical backing for the

correlation between fairytales and sexual purity or future spouses (there are verses relating Christ to a prince or king, but not earthly husbands), it is prevalent across purity books.

The purity book, *Authentic Beauty: the shaping of a set-apart young woman* by Leslie Ludy, a prolific and popular writer of Evangelical sexuality books, describes the purpose of the book is to help the reader become “a set apart young woman who allows the passionate intimacy she experiences with her Prince to completely transform every area of her life” (41). Her Prince represents Christ during her time before marriage, but this imagery is also used to describe her future husband. The book begins with the author’s depiction of her own desire to be a princess. Throughout the book, she primarily depicts the answer to this desire resides in a God sanctioned heterosexual romantic relationship with a man, but the challenge lies in what to do with this desire while she waits for her real life embodied prince (with passive waiting being a whole other theme). The table of contents titling the twelve chapters in *Authentic Beauty* includes two chapter titles bearing the term “Lily Whiteness,” which is problematic in the correlations between whiteness and purity. Other titles include “Preparing for Intimacy” and “Battle Secrets.” One section is titled “Understanding the Crisis Facing Modern-Day Femininity.” Three chapters bear the subtitle “Future Husband Application.” Ludy ventures into discussing appearance and modesty as areas to transform in a young woman’s life, but that still all circles around the idea of pleasing or attracting future husbands. Nowhere in the book is cultivating life vocation or future education discussed as part of developing into a woman with a fulfilling trajectory. Instead the inference is that finding your prince is what will lead to the ultimate fulfillment of every woman’s fantasy to be a princess, and in order to find that prince, you must be “lily white” pure.

The accepted, pure, spiritual version of love looks like a princess in waiting with a prince coming to rescue her. This waiting, in order to remain a pure princess, often requires a withdrawal from the world and “enemies” that might try to influence you, defile you or make you impure. Ludy, in a later book she wrote with her husband, *When God Writes Your Love Story*, describes finding a husband: “This journey is for anyone who is searching for the beauty of true and lasting love, for romance in its purest form, and who is *willing to do whatever it takes* to find it” (13) (italics mine). Part of whatever it takes is at times taking drastic measures to remove yourself from the world and from whatever might act as a distraction from your purity and goals of finding “true and lasting romance...in its purest form.”

Ludy, in *Authentic Beauty*, depicts one aspect of what it took for her to remain pure. She notes the cultural assumption that “To have a successful future, a young woman must carefully follow society’s pattern for success.” She relays a personal story of future college and vocational pressure in high school where she admittedly became “goal oriented and ambitious,” but “the tender patient whisper of my Prince continued to tug at my heart.” (87). She details the struggle between pursuing her educational goals and following her Prince (Jesus). She finally decides to leave high school, “The most important focus of my life now was to build my daily existence around intimacy with Him in my inner sanctuary. I realized it was nearly impossible to do this with my current schedule, so (with plenty of fear and trembling!) I made the decision to continue my education at home” (87). She details how leaving high school and the pressure of college gave her the freedom to spend a substantial portion of her day “alone with her Prince” (in prayer). Ludy quit school to maintain her intimacy with her stand-in Prince as means to remain pure for her future prince as is insinuated by the nature of the whole conversation of the book around purity and finding a future husband. I will be frank, this is disturbing, but the correlation

between educational spaces and long term desire for vocational success as “dangerous” to purity shows up in my participant’s lives as well as specifically discussed in the literacy chapter with all of my participants experiencing some level of homeschooling with the particular motivator being protection from influences outside the church.

Part of this withdrawal is not only removing yourself from outside influences and guarding against potential influences, but also guarding against Christian people around you who might lead to impure thoughts. Knowing this, if you are a Christian woman and care about the purity of the men around you, you must be careful not to tempt them. Klein notes,

In the Evangelical community, an ‘impure’ girl or woman isn’t just seen as damaged; she’s considered *dangerous*. Not only to the men we were told we must protect by covering up our bodies, but to our entire community. For if our men - the heads of our households and the leaders of our churches - fell, we *all* fall (Klein 4).

She notes of her own response to this imperative as her body began to develop and men started to notice her, “I tried to make myself smaller, squishing myself down so I could fit inside of it, but all of the ways in which I was not the “right” kind of Christian woman squeezed through between the hand’s fingers and I was exposed. I tried cutting parts of me off” (33). In an effort to keep the body from becoming an object, you have to make it even more object-like, cutting, removing, and silencing as needed. Harris, who wrote his book at seventeen, appeals to young women, saying, “Remember the wayward woman...your job is to keep your brothers from being led away by her charms.” But then he turns it from talking about a woman in the abstract and speaks to the reader, “Please be aware of how easily your actions and glances can stir up lust in a guy’s mind” (99). Be careful, dear reader, to not be the wayward woman and stir up lust in others. The rest of the section goes on to discuss the way women dress. He talks about a “single

mom” who rededicated her life to Christ saying, “I went through my closet and got rid of anything that might have caused a brother in the Lord to stumble. I asked God to forgive me and to help me protect the purity of those around me” (99). The “single mom” was a wayward woman simply by the implication that she had sex out of marriage. Her wardrobe was a direct correlation between her past misdeeds and her purity. She asked God to forgive her for anything she might have worn that caused her brothers to stumble (and at some point, already led to extramarital sex, a child, and being left alone to raise that child). The implication in including her identity as a “single mom” is that her past engagement in causing her brothers to stumble ultimately led to her losing her child’s father and being alone. The passage does not talk about her child’s father being tempted or his part in her being alone, but instead indicates she needs forgiveness.

Women are considered gatekeepers to pure and satisfying sexuality since men are viewed as sexually vulnerable and weak (with their increased sex drive) and women are designed more for romance (so naturally less inclined to physical temptation or sexual desire). Klein describes the experiences of the women participants in her study who are “haunted by sexual and gender-based anxiety, fear, and physical experiences that sometimes mimic the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (8). Klein doesn’t focus necessarily on the teachings themselves as other authors do, but instead studies their impact on women’s perception of themselves in relationship to their bodies and sexuality with much of her participant’s lives spent believing that their desires are bad and need to be controlled. The personal stories tell of situations of physical abuse, sexual assault, physical harm to control desires, and lifelong sexual and relational issues. Although marital guides describe a sexually available and responsive woman as Godly, many women are dealing with pain and guilt resulting from an adolescence filled with purity guides



that describe this future sexuality as part of a loving, princess-like marriage like we saw in *Authentic Beauty*.

Many wanting to control the mind intentionally resist sexual literacy, but at the heart of purity, and what makes it dangerous long term, is a set-up of a system of control more broadly. Do not listen to yourself or your body. Eliminate things or people that would distract you. The internal pathways of shame, the need for self-control, and isolation established during this time are easily traveled later with the need to control other things, from staying in an abusive marriage to political beliefs. The rhetoric and narratives are easily refashioned for later purposes. If you give this much, you will receive back ten-fold and be able to pay your bills or buy a new car. If you vote this way, it will mean our country will be “good” and Christian again. Do not listen to any doubts that may emerge. You are not to be trusted. Others are more spiritual and know better than you. God forbid you listen to your stomach. It will only lead to pain and destruction.

#### *Future Love*

*My daughter was fifteen when she came home from her young women’s small group hosted by a local Baptist church, held up a bag of five crystals, and told me to guess what they were supposed to be. Having been a former youth group kid myself, I looked at her with incredulity, and said, tell me those are not supposed to be your purity. She nodded her head yes. My daughter was familiar with my area of research and interest, so she knew I would find this simultaneously amusing and horrifying. I knew the damage I had experienced with these teachings, and I operated under the assumption that they had lessened and become more balanced over the years. I was wrong.*

*The jewels had been a visual aid alongside a book they were reading together, Authentic Beauty by Leslie Ludy as has already been discussed here. She told me the bag of jewels*

*represented her purity. With each not only physical but heart encounter with another man, she would give a jewel away. Whatever she had left, she would give to her future husband. The teachings represented in those jewels identify sex and love as something quantifiable. Premarital sex and relationships can lead towards a less satisfying relationship while preserving oneself leads to a more satisfying future marriage and relationship. Being pure of mind and body means you will have more to give to the one you love.*

*Once again, I was struck by how much of these teachings had seemed a part of the past, but here they were in the present day, being taught at not just a small church, but a mega-church in an affluent suburb. They owned not one, but several Greyhound style buses to take teenagers on retreats and youth group trips. Their youth ministry room was large with a balcony style loft. Around the room were around ten different living room like alcoves each with a different style and theme. They had a coffee bar, and arcade games were placed all over the room. All that to say, this church had no small influence in the area and did not represent a fringe fundamentalist congregation. We did not attend this church, but my daughter went to youth group there because quite frankly, all of these resources and large groups of teens made it fun.*

*I asked my daughter if they talked about other things besides purity in her small group, and she said not really. They had taken a survey of what topics people were interested in at the beginning of the year, and the only thing the young women wanted to talk about was purity, sex, and marriage. The leaders obliged. I have met the leaders and some of the other young women in this group, and they are all kind and lovely people, but the group acted as a literacy event where sexuality is placed into easily lost and irreplaceable jewels. My daughter is nineteen now and just told me yesterday that a third girl from the same small group just got married. All three marriages took place before they were nineteen years old.*

Love being quantifiable is just one part of the way purity is enforced. It goes hand in hand with one of the most long reaching destructive teachings related to sexuality: the idea that if you remain pure before marriage, you will have a romantic and fulfilling marriage with lots of amazing sex. It is a giant carrot dangled in front of young people, one that later causes deep pain and spiritual shame when sex does not necessarily turn out to be as wonderful as it was promised to be. Harris implores his readers, “This honor for the sacredness of the sexuality between husband and wife starts *now*, not just after the wedding day” (94). Preemptive guilt is placed upon young people that anything they do now dishonors the person they will someday love and want to spend their life with. It doesn’t talk about honoring *yourself* in the present or future, or that your future husband or wife will even consider all the perhaps destructive means used to get to the marriage pure.

The lamenting of past sexual sin and how it impacts marriage is a strong “cautionary tale” passed around Evangelical circles. Joshua Harris opens his book with a story about a couple on their wedding day. They are in love, but as the minister is leading them through their vows, a girl stands up in the church, walks up, and holds the groom’s hand. Five more girls slowly join her near the groom. As the bride inquires in tears about what is happening, the groom tells her he is sorry and that these are all women he has given his heart to in the past. She cries, and says, ‘I thought your heart was mine,’ and he replies, ‘Everything that is left is yours’” (14). Harris then cues the reader that this story is simply a dream a young woman told him that she had, but then he says, the woman mused, “How many men could line up next to me on my wedding day? How many times have I given my heart away in short-term relationships? Will I have nothing left to give to my husband?” (14). This question frames the book that in particular focuses on the courtship model of dating where one only dates people they would consider marrying and in

ideal circumstances, they do not kiss until the wedding day. Harris's work and influence are far reaching (DeRogatis, Klein, Anderson). Harris later renounced his book and method of dating, but many lives were damaged as dating implied an engagement like commitment, and young people often felt pressure to make a marriage decision even before the first date.

Harris's story is reminiscent of the jewels my daughter brought home with love being a finite resource and the pain it can cause when you do not have anything left to give to your future husband. This is a powerful ploy in that most young Christians are trained to see themselves as flawed, so the thought of harming yourself is not nearly as frightening or motivating as the thought of harming someone else that you might love in the future. And that future love makes all of the current pain worth it.

Another cautionary tale told in Leslie Ludy's book begins in a passage entitled "An Unforgettable Wedding Night." It describes a young couple, in love and on their wedding day, showing up to their hotel room where "the night you have always dreamed about has finally arrived." He carries the bride into the room and sets her down as he whispers, "I have dreamed of this moment my entire life!" a second iteration of the word "dream" in less than a paragraph. The groom says to the bride, "I love you so much," implying that his love is robust and complete (he has all of his jewels). But then he smells something. The room is filled with a noxious odor. The groom looks "bewildered" as they both realize the room is filled with rotting garbage. Quickly, the girl (the story is told from her perspective) sees a group of her ex-boyfriends against the wall. Ludy describes, "You glance over at your groom. He is hanging his head mournfully and dejectedly making his way back down the hall." The bride calls after him, and the groom states that he "just can't be with you tonight-not like this." She looks down and sees spaghetti sauce and stains all over her once white wedding dress, and her dreams are

shattered. Nowhere in this description is it discussed that the garbage in the hotel room may also belong to the groom; it is simply assumed when they walk in the room that it belongs to her. His ex-girlfriends do not line the wall, but hers are there. In spite of his supposed deep love for her on their wedding day, he leaves her when he finds her messy or impure. Even with all of his jewels and love to give (since he did not squander it), he cannot find it in himself to be with her, and he leaves. It is no coincidence that both Harris's and Ludy's stories portray the wedding day. Most purity teachings tend to focus on that 'happily ever after' wedding moment where most fairy tales conclude. The prince finds the princess, and they have a magical night together that establishes the happy years to come. With the predominance of teachings focused on remaining pure before marriage, there is a dearth of teachings about what day to day life actually looks like after the wedding day and honeymoon night.

When sex in marriage, or marital love in general, does not meet the expectations set up by purity teachings, the blame falls on individual spiritual states and past sexual wrongdoing. Klein notes,

I was about fifteen years old when I first heard a pastor say from the pulpit: Every man wants a woman who is a lamb in the day, and a tiger at night...Somehow purity culture has turned a pornographic fantasy about a virgin turned vamp into "morality," so that now both a woman's nonsexuality before marriage and her hypersexuality *after* marriage are required for her to be considered good. (139)

Even seeking sexual help later while married can garner blame, "If the wife admits to any premarital sexual expression, including masturbation, in a counseling session, she risks being told that their problems are rooted in her sin" (Klein 129). Part of the dynamic of harm and shame is due to the sharp dichotomy between marital sex manuals which portray women as

needing to offer porn quality sex and purity books with their childlike fantasy images, and admitting any struggle switching between these two mindsets implies engagement with past sin.

One of my participants, Maddy, was about two years out from her 15-year marriage ending when I interviewed her. Maddy and her husband were youth pastors together and had two children. Their marriage was challenging and at times fraught with mental illness and emotional abuse, which people at her church were aware of. Eventually, Maddy decided to leave her husband. She had begun a relationship with someone else, and when the church staff found out, they publicly confronted her and fired her from her position. Around two months later, her separated husband took his own life. Since that time, Maddy has been working to piece her life together with her two teenage children. She is dating again, which she openly shared with her parents and family. Right before she met with me for the interview, she dropped off her dog at her mom's house, and when she told her mom that I was interviewing her, her mother said, "Well, you didn't have sex before you were married, right?" Maddy was 36 years old and had gone through immense trauma in her relationship and breakup, and yet, somehow her virginity played a role in all of this. In her mother's question, we hear the correlation between past sexual sin and marital success. Maddy's mother needed to believe that Maddy had done everything right and remained a virgin, so the marriage falling apart could not be blamed on Maddy. If she had been a virgin, then the blame must certainly fall somewhere else. There was no mention of her current relationships or sexual activity; somehow the state of her purity before marriage acted as a foreshadowing and a justification for what came later, even after the marriage had ended. If Maddy began the marriage on the right foot as a virgin, then it must be her husband who carries the past sexual sin and blame.

With purity being an indicator of later sexual satisfaction and a successful marriage, many young people, particularly women, work during those years to protect their scant bag of jewels and through their inner purity and devotion, earn a better marriage. In many ways though, this teaching often can lead to future disillusionment as statistically, most will fail at remaining pure, and developing a solid marriage takes a lot more than being a virgin on your wedding night. When this disillusionment comes, at times, the whole house of cards falls down. For many, the failed promise of purity is so powerful, they leave Christianity altogether.

### *Lose Salvation and Community*

*I was twenty when I found out I was pregnant. I had dated my boyfriend for a month and a half before we became engaged after we had come near to having sex. My boyfriend had gone to our pastor, and the pastor encouraged that my boyfriend's commitment to me did not match how far we had gone physically, and it was better to marry than burn with lust as the scripture said in 1 Corinthians 7:9, a verse that is heavily used to encourage quick engagements. We were not the only couple that had hurried up to escape having sex before marriage. An engagement period of six months was ideal. Anything longer would only bring on more temptation.*

*Right after we got engaged, we failed and had sex. It was unplanned and unprotected. Afterwards, I cried off and on for days. I didn't dare tell anyone. I bargained with God that I would not have premarital sex again if I just wasn't pregnant. My boyfriend asked if we should buy condoms when we went to the store for a pregnancy test, and I told him no because we were never doing it again. My friends and I went on a road trip to Chicago and one of them brought along a box of wedding magazines to help plan my big day. The conversation quickly turned to sex, and they asked me what I thought sex would be like on my wedding day. I lied and made up*

*a dreamy answer all the while knowing it was already too late. I could not even touch the thought inside of myself that I was no longer a virgin.*

*When I finally took that pregnancy test, and it came up positive, I felt my life had suddenly taken a sharp turn off God's "ideal" plan for my life, and anything else that happened from here on out in my life would be slightly skewed or imperfect because of what I had done. I would make the best of it, but I would never get the life I might have had if I had waited to have sex until I was married. When it came out to others that I was pregnant, I had a series of apologies to make. I worked for a Christian organization and had to sit down with the president and tell him what I had done. He told me that he had cautioned me about this sort of thing happening. I told him I knew that he had, and I had failed. I followed that meeting up with a letter to the board, apologizing again for what I had done. At church, I had to get on stage in front of the youth group and tell them I had sex and was pregnant. I lost count of all the individual people and family friends I had to talk to about my errors and my acute awareness and angst over what I had done. Eventually, I performed this apology robotically knowing the contrite look people wanted to see and the love and pity from them I needed to be grateful for. There was nothing they could say or do that I had not done or said to myself. I had not been saved. I failed, and I had drowned. Now on the bottom of the ocean, I had to create a life with my movements slowed in the deep water. At least once the apologies were over, I could maybe rest.*

The belief that I had ruined my future marriage was only one layer of the guilt. I also had to face the very real communal and eternal consequences for my sexual misdeeds. The correlation between spiritual failing and sexuality raises the stakes for believers in following teachings. Pure and proper sexuality extends beyond the physical and even the individual as it is believed to have eternal and communal consequences (DeRogatis, Regenerus). DeRogatis notes



that those who fall into sexual sin or impurity, “jeopardize their own salvation, the salvation of future children, and those souls waiting to be brought to Christ” (3). Their “sexual body” is linked with the “state of the soul,” and most importantly, sets them apart from dominant culture and acts as a Christian witness to others (6). Linda Klein, in her book, *Pure*, describes one of her participants in her twelve-year ethnographic study as saying, “Sex is the big issue that marks your spiritual standing with God” (11). Klein goes on to say, “The purity message is not about sex. Rather, it is about us: who we are, who we are expected to be, and who it is said we will become if we fail to meet those expectations” (14). It is not simply a quiet, individual choice. The state of a person’s sexuality, particularly a young person’s, is meant to be a matter of open knowledge, not only in the Christian community, but also in the world. So, when a young person becomes impure, the shame and failure they might experience is both personal and public.

Once it was found out that my participant Josh had sex with his girlfriend, his standing in his church community was deeply impacted (discussed further in Chapter 4), but in an even more destructive way, his own family believed that his sexual activity indicated who he was as a person and what terrible things he might be capable of. He told a story of the culminating moment that led to him leaving his family home. At the time, he was around 20 years old, and he no longer had a bedroom at his house and was crashing on the couch, a move that was made after the admission of his sexual activity. He came home late at night after working at a local ministry food bank and saw his 15-year-old sister was not at home. He assumed, since it was late at night, that she was at a sleepover or something, so he decided to sleep in her bed. Later that night, his sister came home and slept on the bed next to him, on top of the covers. Josh knew her lying next to him was because she was comfortable. He explained, “She was like, well Josh’s okay. She was like whatever...We were always, really all of us kids, we were always really close. We played

sports together. We walked our dogs. We were really all our own best friends in a lot of ways because we didn't have much of a social group outside of them.” With homeschooling, Josh and his siblings were much closer than possibly your typical siblings. Even without that closeness and with years of later reflection, Josh did not find his sister’s action inappropriate or even that strange.

Josh’s mother would roam the house in the middle of every night checking to make sure each kid was in their bed, which Josh knows now is not typical mother behavior. He noted that she was not looking for their safety, but for suspicious behavior. She found Josh in his sister’s bed and confronted him in front of the whole family the next morning. Josh talks about this exchange,

And I basically told her, I'm out. You can't trust me for anything right now. Like I would never do anything to harm or anything sexual at all. Like, this is bullshit. You don't even know your son. I mean you're accusing me of something I haven't done. I haven't done anything. When I told you like I got home at night and there was an empty bed and it was more comfortable than the couch, that was my mindset at the time.

Even in Josh’s explanation to me, I could sense he still felt he needed to convince me that what happened was innocent. I wanted him to know that I believed him, and I told him those are very serious accusations for a parent to make, and I don’t think most parents would jump to that conclusion if they found their kids in the same bed. I believe there was a part of him, even with knowing his mother’s control and abuse, that did not see how incredibly unusual it was for a parent to arrive at the conclusions his mother did, and that accusation was about her, not his actions. He describes his feelings in the moment when she confronted him,

I just felt like it was this complete injustice. I'm kind of like, I'm never going to get this woman's approval for anything anyway. You know I had already done the cardinal sin [sex with his girlfriend] and everybody knew about it... I had just dragged the family household name through the mud with it coming out that I had fornicated. So shameful. She couldn't trust me for anything. I was literally like the devil or possessed by the devil or worse or whatever. At that point, I just don't think...I just kind of quit at that point. Even with his mother's atypical reaction to finding Josh in his sister's bed, it is *not* unusual for his Christian community, including his mother, to believe that his sexual activities signaled that any sort of depravity is possible for him. So much so, that there was no distinction between the desires that would lead him to have sex with a girlfriend and the desires to harm his sister. All of it signaled, he was "possessed by the devil or worse."

Josh left that day. He left his family home and moved out to live with his paternal Aunt, who had offered him a place knowing the destructive nature of his family. He also left his church and ultimately, his faith that day.

## CONCLUSION

Michael Foucault in the *The History of Sexuality* says about sexual repression and change,

We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required (5).

Even with Foucault addressing sexual repression writ large, his words have even more pressing meaning for those coming from a *nucleus* of repressive power such as Evangelicalism. Through overt means, such as purity texts, and through more subtle means, such as literacy events, soft dominance, and cautionary tales, we see the ways this power is maintained. Even more importantly, we see how requiring purity of mind and thought while creating doubt about the credibility of internal voice and embodied desires creates a system of *self* management. This self monitoring creates even greater hurdles towards gaining a sexual literacy that understands the relationship to self and sexuality, not to mention the relationship to sexuality and society. My participants and I were not “able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost.” This cost extended to both community and to Christian personal salvation. The next chapter will look more deeply into the individual stories of the costs my participants paid and their moment of the paying.

## **CHAPTER 4- TELL ME A MOMENT: PROCESS OF CHANGE**

The core of this project was looking at the process of change, truly exploring the ways people shift their minds resulting in embodied and observable changes in their lives and practices. Shifting and change are all the more profound when we acknowledge the Evangelical cultural undergirding and the communal cost of a change in sexual beliefs and practices as seen in Chapter 2. This chapter revolves around one interview question that ended up being key in capturing the stories and experiences of change: tell me about a moment when you knew that you had changed. The answers to this question revealed moments when the pieces of personal doubt and conflicted experiences came together while at the same time their place in their worlds and communities fell apart. The moment itself involved reflecting and listening to their inner voice, and that reflection initiated important, life altering actions. As these moments were the culmination of built up experiences, their stories depicted both the evidence for the external change as well as the internal sensemaking during the process. For most, it was the moment the negative reaction and rejection they anticipated became a reality. For some of them, the ramifications of those changes were even worse than they imagined, and the ripple effects extend to their lives today. This chapter will demonstrate how change and coming to see a different way of living can be high stakes and carry significant cost.

What are the elements that led to change for my participants? With hindsight, they are able to identify seeds that ultimately led to a moment they realized they had changed. These early seeds of thought were for some moments of incongruence with the stories in which they had been enculturated and their own personal experience of reality. All of them felt unseen as they wrestled with doubts. Some of them identified people that did see them and how those people encouraged them to accept themselves without judgement and listen to their own voice.

But for many, change involved failing community and religious guidelines that pushed them into facing the fact that their own personal story did not align with the story they were *supposed* to be living.

Doubt acted as a catalyst for change for my participants, but even acknowledging doubt within the Evangelical community carries its own costs. For the sake of understanding how their changes began, I will briefly detail how the concept of doubt itself is significant in Evangelicalism. Following this background, I will share my participants' stories one-by-one.

## DOUBT

For Evangelicals, doubt is a sin and an intrinsic flaw that needs vigilant attention to overcome, which for my participants led to fear of judgement if they shared their internal struggles. For some, they experienced judgement when they did share, and for others, they were afraid of even acknowledging their own doubts to themselves and what they might mean about their faith and identity. The belief system that discouraged uncertainty and doubt is based upon a myriad of teachings, but in particular it is those based on how listening to your heart can lead to deep failure, evil, and even death. For example, in the Bible verse from Mark 7:21-23 it says, “For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” (*The Bible*) A person’s heart could represent feelings or thought, but it originates inside of oneself, and colloquially, we often equate our heart with our inner voice and empathetic response to others and even towards ourselves. If listening to our inner feelings, intuitions, and thoughts can lead to evil, one’s ability to discern who or what to listen to in general comes under question. If you cannot trust your internal thoughts, how do you ascertain who else to trust?

Doubt, questioning, or being unsure are often associated with some of these internal thoughts that can lead one astray. “One who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.” (James 1:5-8). With doubt being a sign of instability, many people are reluctant to express them to others. In addition, those who struggle with doubt or double-mindedness “should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.” Christians believe the Lord is the giver of all good things in a person’s life, so for a young person being told they will not receive any good things - a home, a spouse, a job - the threat against doubt is powerful. There is deep incentive to shut down and silence your internal voice, particularly if it is questioning, and simply follow what you are told to do.

It is not only good that will be withheld in your life, but there are mortal consequences related to doubt. The chapter describing doubt in the book of James follows with,

When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me’. For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:13-15).

It is feeling, thought, and desire that lead to “evil,” “no good things,” and even “death.” With verses such as these pervasive in Evangelical culture, seeds of doubt or questioning are often suppressed and reviled. They carry danger within them of mortal consequences. But for my participants, it was the *suppression of doubt itself* that led to what was interpreted by their communities as sin. The buildup of unanswered questions and doubts contributed to the feeling of being unseen, and they recognized that being seen would lead to judgement and powerful consequences. The intuitions and fears about their communities’ responses to revealing their

struggles ended up being accurate assessments of what would take place after they revealed their truth.

In the following sections, I tell the stories of my participants and their moments of change. Instead of culling out themes and arranging in that fashion, I tell each participants' story singularly as a way to honor the way they told it.

## JOSH

*“It's like, you know, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. But on the sidelines, you can cut that horse off from any other water source for years, and they are eventually going to dip their foot in.”*

Josh was around twenty years of age when serious doubts began about his place in the Christian community to which he belonged. He experienced an acute moment of change when his family and community found out about his sexual experiences, which led to betrayal, feeling unseen, and a deep incongruence with the teachings of the church and his own internal sense of self. For his moment of change, he focuses on a couple month period, but in comparison to many of my participants, this is a rather short time. Even though his telling moved back and forth in time as the answers to new questions often required backstory context, I tell his story chronologically as all of the events are linked.

In his late teens and early twenties, Josh was intensely involved in his fundamentalist church and volunteered around twenty hours a week there and in a local food pantry. He played bass on the worship team which practiced several hours a week in addition to performances. The young people at the church looked up to him as a good Christian, and he was actively involved in youth ministry as a leader. Even though this is just a list of his activities, he was also deeply emotionally dedicated. Josh had spent his whole life in the church and considered it his family,



“his tribe.” In his own words, “It was a serious thing for me. I was committed to this. It was part of my life, you know. It wasn't insignificant.” The context of the breadth of his involvement, his deep emotional and spiritual commitment, and his consideration of his church home as his family is important because, as he identifies, it sets the stage for the deep betrayal he experienced.

Around this time of early adulthood, Josh had sexual intercourse with his girlfriend which he acknowledged represented a deep need for connection on his part, but also caused extreme guilt.

I was tearing myself up over it, you know. Like I'm trying to do the right thing; I'm trying to live a holy life, but I just couldn't help myself. It's sex. It's like it's fun and it's exciting. I mean at that point I had never experienced a level of connection with somebody like that, nothing close, know what I mean? It was an amazing experience, but it was so bad.

It was so horrible. You're not supposed to do it.

Josh also lived in fear of the consequences for his actions or of sharing his struggles, “I didn't feel like I could really go to anybody to talk to about it because you know as soon as you talk about it well you're going to get cast out. You're going to get kicked off the worship team which I really enjoyed at the time.” Josh was looking for connection, which he found in his sexual relationship with his girlfriend. He wanted to find it in his family and church community, but it did not compare to the emotional connection he found in sex. And now, with knowledge of what he had done, he knew further sharing would lead to painful consequences.

Josh's guilt and internal struggle eventually led to him confessing his sexual activities to his older brother who was the worship leader at their church. Josh carefully considered the role of his brother as confidant before talking to him, but he considered that he knew his brother had struggled with similar things and had intercourse himself before marriage. He thought they might

connect with similar struggles, and he likewise considered him his “trusted big brother.” On the Sunday morning after he told his brother, Josh was on stage with the worship team, and he describes, “Before I even realized he had told anybody, I was being hauled out and called out in front of the church and I got people's hands on my forehead, pushing me and stuff like that.” Josh spoke with emotion as he told this story. He could not believe that a brother he trusted, who he went to looking for help with his struggle would betray him. He referred to this moment throughout the interview. The powerful betrayal from his brother and the community moment of public shaming was a key “tipping point” for him. He says, “That was one of the moments where I’m like-- this is bullshit.”

This Sunday morning experience was not the only intervention from his community. Josh’s girlfriend asked him to help her move to New York City where she would be attending college. They would drive there together and stay for a couple of days. He desperately wanted to go because he had never really traveled and found the opportunity to see New York exciting, but he labored over the implications of the trip for his standing in the community and with his family. He eventually decided to go.

During the drive, he receives a call from his pastor who had been given Josh’s phone number from his mother. He describes the moment, “He gets me on the phone and tells me to turn around. And he starts spouting off in tongues. Like turn the car around. Like you're doing what the devil wants you to do and all that... he's telling me what to do, like with a real sense of authority... like that girl she has a Jezebel spirit. I'm not making this up!” Throughout the conversation, Josh would frequently say to me that what happened was real. I think even in the moment of him relaying his story to me it felt surreal to him. I often had to affirm that I believed him. I offered details that I remember my own church members saying to women they had a

“jezebel spirit.” I also had to let him know that I grew up in a church similar to this one, and none of what he said was surprising in its spiritual nature and in its deep betrayal. The phone call from his pastor compounded his feelings of betrayal with his mother giving his pastor his phone number and also it was a betrayal of relationship and feeling as well with the pastor. This call caused Josh to realize that his pastor did not care to inquire into the feelings and motives that led to Josh’s struggles. He did not see him. Instead, he commanded him to come back, using religious practices (praying in tongues) as a manipulative tool to get Josh to comply. In all of this, Josh refers again and again to no one really asking him about who he is or what struggles led him to his sexual relationship. Instead, they commanded him to change and comply.

Josh begins to recognize that who he is as a person is not as important as his public, outward actions. The betrayal of his brother and the commanding actions from his pastor only compound the feelings of being unseen. He begins to find that although he considered this church community to be his family, they did not see him that way, and even worse, they did not see or practice love, being a “tribe,” or a family in the ways they professed to and in the ways he desperately desired and needed in his life. He sees that his pastor is following a script laid out for him of what a pastor should do in the same way he wants Josh to follow a script of what a young man should do. This script does not recognize others around you as people. Instead, those around you are supporting actors to your part. Josh was not following his lines. He describes his realizations after his pastor’s phone call.

He's not trying to really understand me, you know. He's going by the playbook. He's the pastor. He's the shepherd, the one that protects his flock, right. So, he's just kind of this automaton. I just didn't see him as a real human at that point, you know. He's like you're doing what your role tells you that you're supposed to do right here. I didn't feel that he

really counseled me as a young man when the initial break came out...as a pastor, I didn't feel he was trying to reach down and understand maybe the root problem of why I gave in.

In contrast, Josh's older sister had a moment during this time where she did see who Josh is and cared about his internal struggle. He describes her as the strongest woman he knows and a primary role model in his life. He talked to her about the struggle over his sexuality and the trip he wanted to take with his girlfriend,

She kind of smiled at me, she's like-- Josh you should trust yourself...you should go make up your mind. And I broke down crying at that point because the support was there. Like my sister Gail loved me. I was honest with her and she was honest with me. And she didn't condemn me for wanting something like that connection, right? You know sexuality, that's really what I wanted and what I didn't have - a connection - somebody that just understood. Someone that suffered with me and was like was happy with me, and like that's what I didn't have and that's what I wanted and that was what the girl offered to me at that time.

It was this contrast of being seen, loved, and supported by his sister with being unseen by his pastor, the public shaming of his church community, and his brother's betrayal that caused Josh to be pushed to listen to his own thoughts and trust himself, just as his sister had encouraged,

So, this is where my internal compass is telling me that this is all wrong. *This is all wrong*...at that point, I'm kind of like you know this might be a sin and this might be a mistake, but everything in my heart is telling me to go the other direction. Everything in my mind, it was a very confusing time. At that point I'm kind of like, what do I do? There are consequences in either direction. Like if I go back to the church, it's going to be the

same shallow acceptance, the same shallow everyone following their routines. And not necessarily happier people. And there's this girl that I love, a really wild exciting thing and I think most young men would have done what I did. I went to New York and I had a great time.

Josh chose to follow his own internal thoughts and his heart. Either path in front of him would bring pain and loss, but the one offered the possibility of connection and being seen. The other path meant he would live “shallow” and play his role without being allowed to struggle. He chose the path of what his community would consider sin, and he did experience the consequences of his choice. He was kicked off the worship team and slowly felt people at the church stop speaking to him and pushing him out. Eventually, his own mother began to see him as a person controlled by the devil, which he associated as the way she could rationalize or deal with the appearance of her family’s good reputation being dragged “through the mud.” She thought he was “literally like the devil or possessed by the devil or worse or whatever.” She accused him of horrible and dark motives (particularly sexually) even in very innocent actions (as further described in Chapter 3). He found she, like the others in his community, could only see the outside of who he was and refused to inquire deeper into who he truly was.

Although his mother never said the words you are kicked out, he was not welcome in his home any longer. She gave his bed to one of his siblings and was left to sleep on the floor or couch. He quietly left to live with his Aunt and found himself very alone in the world for a while. He describes, “I just kind of felt completely isolated, and again, the theme on it's a tribe, right? That was my big thing you know. I know this is not focusing much on my sexuality, you know. Sexuality is largely an outward expression of an internal condition. I think what I'm saying is kind of valid or it feels valid to me.” Josh’s sexuality acted as the impetus for his

community, “his tribe,” rejecting him, but it was the lack of connection and love, when he most needed it, that additionally drove him away. He wasn’t looking for sex. Sex was a means for meeting the deep need to be seen and cared about. The point when he had sex was a deep and painful struggle for him. He needed even more support and love to follow the role he had been given of being a good Christian. Instead, he was dehumanized and commanded to comply. Even his touching on the validity of this need at the end of his statement speaks towards his awareness that there are people who would find that need invalid, perhaps even I would find it as an insufficient reason for what he did.

The point of change for Josh happened over a relatively short period of painful months. The revealing of the lack of community support alongside his growing acknowledgement of his need for love and connection compelled/forced him to choose another path. Even now, he reflects this was a horrible time in his life. He had failed to live a holy life and also felt his community had failed him. As he noted, there were consequences and pain in both directions. Today, Josh identifies as an atheist. He says he has been very successful in his work and made a good life for himself, especially with the challenges of his upbringing and his early illiteracy (see Chapter 5). He has helped support his younger siblings as they in turn have also had their journeys of being unwelcomed and left isolated. His sister Gail and he are still very close. He now lives with his girlfriend for the last seven years.

BEN

*“Well it started very early trying to, I guess, hide natural curiosity about the world. Because I wasn't allowed. And so, it [being Christian] truly did dictate just everything you know from not being able to listen to secular music to you know what I watch on T.V.”*

Ben's story tumbled out during our interview. To my pleasure, he talked almost 45 minutes straight from the first question asking him to describe how he grew up and the day to day role of religion in his family. I worked with Ben in a youth ministry, where we traveled and spent literally every day together. We were both 18, and it was our first year out of high school and living away from our families and homes. After his interview, I realized I was witness to a key year of change for him. We both were intensely caught up with trying to be good Christians and wrestling with the elements of ourselves that we thought were hindrances to that ideal identity. Although Ben had been honest with himself for many years about his sexuality, it was during that year that he became honest with others. He also began to acknowledge misalignments with who he was and who he had been told he needed to be, and he realized that these misalignments might ultimately hurt himself and potentially could hurt others. He tells the story of the days leading up to that year and describes the years afterwards as his journey led him to even deeper reflection and acknowledgement of who he was and the painful experiences in his life that were both not his fault and also made him into a kind, compassionate, and loyal person.

Ben is funny and lighthearted. He is downright charming and physically very beautiful. People are drawn to him, and this is not lost on him as he cares about the people in his life intensely. He has maintained friendships from every period of his 40 years from Elementary school on. He is a good storyteller, and he moved from funny to serious in a moment, and it caught me up in a delightful rollercoaster of laughter, tears, and goosebumps. But the serious undercurrent of his story surfaced profoundly when I asked him what he would want to tell his younger 12 or 13-year-old self. He said two things: find someone outside your Christian community to talk to and stay away from the scary stuff. Both of these instructions offer the framework for his experiences of isolation and hiding for the first twenty years of his life, and

the subsequent self-destructive behaviors and blame he wrestled with for the latter twenty years of his life.

Around the time of 13 years old, Ben started experiencing sexual attraction to men. He was not able to fully understand what that meant, but he now reflects on experiences, particularly with television and images that invoked at the time, a puzzling response. Around the same time, he also began to struggle with body dysmorphia, which would become a deep and painful struggle his whole life. The dysmorphia compelled him to seek approval from others, particularly regarding his physical attraction. He started going to a gym at the age of 15, and there he found that affirmation from other men. He had his first sexual experience with a man, who was around 30 years of age, who invited him to his home. This secret physical relationship continued throughout his high school years. Ben never shared any facts about his personal life, even his name, and neither did the sexual partner, which would become relevant later.

Ben hid these sexual experiences from everyone. He grew up in a very religious home. His dad was a pastor, and he was homeschooled until high school when he started part time for two years and finished his latter two years full time (discussed further in Chapter 5). He also attended youth group and had close friends there who he did not think would approve or understand his struggles. He describes, “Sexually I was just very confused. And no one to talk to about it. There wasn't anybody to talk to that I knew would just go look at me and tell me I was going to hell. That would be the first thing, you know. I just didn't need that. That's not what I needed you know. I felt like that [he was going to hell] anyway.” Ben struggled with the realization that his desires would probably lead to going to hell, and he didn't want others to confirm that with their judgement.



He had a particular experience with his family that further enforced his need to hide from potential judgement. Between his Sophomore and Junior year, Ben drank at a party, which led to him being grounded for an entire summer, even from youth group. But the pain of it was the severity of their response when he confessed to what happened. He notes, "I'm the one that told them. It wasn't like they had to find out. I offered up the information, which in retrospect was dumb. But because it was during a prayer meeting and I felt guilty, I confessed my sin; and it backfired so harshly, that it never quite recovered." One instance at one party led to a division between his father and him that ripples even today. His father refused to attend Ben's performance in his highly competitive high school talent show. They pulled him out of school during his senior year, and in order for him to return, they made him sign a contract saying he would not drink again. If this one small event caused this much division, how much damage would be caused by confessing his sexuality?

Ben immediately followed up this story with one in which he said his parents did not have a Christmas tree growing up because they believed it was based on a Pagan ritual and some people in their church characterized it as "evil." Although his parents did not necessarily think it was evil, they still participated because of appearances,

Don't rock the boat. We have to look like Christians, speak like Christians, dress like Christians. Blah, blah, blah. I don't know, so that's all of that and then you know when you're in that kind of atmosphere, you know sex is just not talked about. Period. It's such a taboo subject and therefore becomes super uncomfortable.

This sort of commitment to appearances even stretched to something as simple as a Christmas tree. This atmosphere of attending to what others think alongside the severe consequences from

one misstep led Ben to hide further. He noted the power of this hiding when I asked him why he wanted to tell his story,

Like if what you are preaching or telling children who are feeling different or gay or whatever it might be, telling them that they're different and gay and bad and sinful is absolutely the worst possible way to handle it because it further isolates. And it further makes like, for me, it further made me hide everything that I was doing because it wasn't allowed to be talked about. Leading to lies which I felt like I did for at least the first 20 years of my life. Like literally feeling like 2 different people...It was hard and difficult and remembering the stories and what stories and the made-up stories are

Ben noted this hiding has the weight of life and death as kids kill themselves when they cannot find a safe space to share who they are. This hiding went even deeper for him as he felt part of the cause of him being gay was him being molested as a child. This part of his story he has wrestled with most of his life. He talked about how sharing our stories, even the hardest ones, impacts your life,

I think that the more we can talk about the things in the closet...no pun intended or pun intended... or the storeroom inside of our minds of all the things that are hurtful and that we kind of keep locked under lock and key. You know, the dark side of ourselves. The more we can shed light on it, the more we can grow as people and I think the more we can be honest with ourselves and the better people we'll be that we have a greater understanding of these around us. Because there is nothing there. I feel like literally very very few people in this world that we all can't relate to on something. We're all human and although we might not talk about the dark stuff and the stuff that we hide,

we all have it. The more we shed light on it, the more actually we can be compassionate and loving and kind to each other.

Ben recognizes that sharing his story and allowing others to do the same unlocks that understanding from others around us. This ideal he holds closely, and in many ways, the damage of his hiding has led to his passion for sharing and openness.

The need to share his hidden sexuality catalyzed when during his senior year, the man he had been having secret encounters with became the new drama teacher at his high school. Ben did not know this man's identity until he saw him at his high school talent show and was shook with fear that somehow this man would reveal Ben to others as gay. He realizes now that this man probably had even more fear and more to lose from having their underage sexual encounters revealed.

This fear made him seriously face the struggle inside himself about his sexuality. He decided to go to work at a Christian ministry for a year (the one we were at together), and "that conversation that I had with God over and over and over again that year like, if this is wrong, you're going to have to change this. You're going to have to redo my wiring." Ben asked God to take away his feelings of attraction to men or he was going to have to figure out a different way to live. If his feelings did not change, Ben did not want to get married to a woman and with certainty have an affair and hurt someone he would love and care about.

Ironically, it was this year away in Christian ministry that solidified his sexual identity. He confessed his attractions and experiences to people there, and no one judged him. He also began a relationship with his roommate that was sexually charged, but more importantly, emotionally connected. This relationship was the first emotional feelings, in addition to attraction, he had for a man. And in many ways his friend returned the affection and attraction;

although, he never publicly identified as gay and later married a woman (Ben was in his wedding). This year also began his search to really understand for himself what the Bible said about being gay. After much research, he found the Bible did not necessarily support the stance most Evangelical churches took, and he subsequently moved away from organized religion. This realization though that God did not condemn him helped him face revealing his life choices to others.

Ben did not describe the moment he told his family, but he did say that he struggled with deep anger towards his father for much of his later years. It is only recently that they allowed Ben's partner to attend family functions, but they asked him to position his partner as a friend, so his nieces and nephews didn't find out about their romantic relationship. Just this last year while at Christmas, his father saw the photo screensaver on his phone of Ben kissing his partner's cheek. His father told him that as long as he was at his house, he would need to change his screensaver. Ben relayed that he feels conflicted in those moments between keeping the peace in his family and being honest with who he is. For many years, he leaned towards the former, and he relayed that it is only recently and with support from his partner, that he has begun to be more determined about being true to himself and with others when he is with his family.

Ben's changes took place over a span of years, and it was his being honest with his story and realizing it did not align with the Evangelical story he had been living that made him eventually choose to publicly change his sexual beliefs and practices. This caused a loss of familial relationships, but it also saved him from doing deep harm to a potential wife he might have to take if he remained hidden. After his "coming out," he dove deep into dangerous behaviors initially believing if he was going to openly live this lifestyle that he would go "all the way" into being as reckless as he could, which led to drug abuse and being in "dangerous"

situations where he said people died for much less. Eventually, he found his balance, and through that, he has been able to face his body dysmorphia and the guilt he carried over the abuse he experienced when he was younger. He also has been able to talk about his views with others who are in a questioning spot or finding themselves raw and fresh after leaving a religious lifestyle. He also has been able to have honest conversations with other pastors and past friends about the harm Christian teachings and hiddenness on sexuality had on him and he believes even on the broader political culture. He sounds happy. He said his goal is to spread kindness to everyone around him from people at the grocery store to those he has been close to for decades. He has two dogs, is an architect, and lives with his partner on the west coast.

MADDY

*“I have to say I do not regret it. The biggest thing that I am ashamed of and that I regret because of the social consequences is the biggest thing I don’t regret in my life. How messed up is that?”*

I have known Maddy for around ten years. Maddy is vibrant, beautiful, and “spicy” as we like to joke. We went to church together, where she and her husband were the youth pastors. We had traveled in the same circles for years, but we became close when our lives unraveled around the same time when we both separated from our spouses. Similar to my own story, I knew Maddy had a complex marriage. When you are in one yourself, you can sense it in others, and her stories told at women’s bible study and over drinks at girl’s night backed up that intuition. Similar to myself, Maddy married young...around nineteen years of age, which was the norm in our Christian world. Not long after, she had two children, and then life began its building process. She was around 35 years of age when she began the separation process. Because I knew the outline of her story prior to this interview, we talked much more about the internal build up and fall out around the tangible things that took place. The path she walked after her separation

was deeply traumatic involving nearly complete community rejection, job loss, and violence. Desperation and a deep desire for honesty and to be seen and heard led to her decision for change, but her life was thrust even further into the spotlight than perhaps she imagined it would ever be.

When Maddy showed up to my house for the interview, she was upset about an encounter she had with her mom right before coming over. She told her mother about the interview she was doing with me, and her mother disapproved. Maddy described how it affected her, “I feel like I already have her standing there with like a voice of shame in my head. Already, because she was saying...a big thing in our family is ‘don’t put your business out there.’ So, I learned to hide any of my feelings very early on.” But Maddy was not necessarily telling a story in this interview about her family “business” as much as about her own sexuality. Maddy’s sexuality is what her mother feels reflects on her and causes embarrassment to the family. Her mother asked her in this pre-interview conversation, “Well, you didn’t have sex before you were married, right?” Her mother asked Maddy this question as a single woman at the age of 36 with two teenage children. Her mother also knew that Maddy was currently seeing other people and did not plan on marrying again, but somehow this early in life alignment with sexuality teachings and rules was important.

Maddy and her husband did have sex with each other before marriage, and this was not the first time she has been asked about it by members in her family. In that moment before coming to talk to me, Maddy still felt forced to lie to her mother as she had done for years and tell her no, she did not have sex before marriage. She described her feelings afterwards,

I lied to her and it felt so stupid. It felt so dumb to have to say that.... It was completely how she presented it. It just scared me right away. And I have lied to her about that

before too, so now I feel like I am just not ready.... I don't want to be scared anymore, but I am still that 19-year-old little girl when she brought that question up and I said no. Although Maddy is honest with her mother about her current sexual activity, which her mother is also not pleased with, she can't bring herself to tell the truth about her earlier sexuality and the lies she told about it. With resignation, Maddy noted, "I feel like she needs to be in a safe bubble, so what's the point? I'll allow that for her. She doesn't need her world shaken up." In the moment her mother asks her, Maddy recognizes the question about her virginity is more about her mother than about herself, but it pulls Maddy back into that shame loop, which is compounded with the shame of not being able to bring herself to tell the truth. Maddy is not one easily frightened, so her fear response is significant.

Maddy is tired of lying and of being scared, and part of her biggest change is choosing to be radically honest with herself and others. She considers it one of her core values now, "Ever since the last two years, I don't have time or space for bullshit or lies or secrecy." In this statement, Maddy is not simply talking about her virginity, but more importantly, she is talking about feeling forced to hide the full destructive nature of her marriage. Her husband struggled with mental illness, and at times, Maddy did as well. They struggled to get well and found they triggered each other's personal struggles profoundly, and they engaged in a constant cycle of harm and setback. For the last two years of her marriage, Maddy began sharing the depth of their struggles with her close friends and her pastors, who were also her colleagues. They asked her not to share as much because they felt torn between the two of them. They did not know how to balance what she said with their understanding of her husband. Maddy and her husband also had to maintain a certain level of public decorum with their roles leading the youth. She notes, "They said this is a boundary and you cannot talk about your relationship with Chris. We love Chris,

and we are going to tell him the same thing, but you guys can't." When I asked what she thought deep down why they didn't want her to share, she said, "If I could guess, they also have problems in their marriage and it would have hit too close to home and they would kind of have to think about well what kind of truths am I not looking at in my own marriage." Hiding the depth of marriage troubles is not uncommon, but it becomes particularly destructive when there are harmful patterns in place which cannot be shared. Even with them asking her not to, Maddy persisted in telling them because she was desperate,

I think they still had hope that we weren't going to get divorced because I hadn't filed right away. But they did not want to encourage me talking about the truth about how bad it was. And I did. I told them the truth about what was going on, like no, this has actually been really bad for years and years and years and this is what's been going on and they were just done hearing about it.

Maddy desperately wanted to have others understand how dark and desperate her situation was, but she was deliberately silenced.

Compound this silencing with the imperative that marriage is central to faith, and this hiding becomes even more destructive. Maddy describes the spiritual and communal incentives to stay married, "You know, you are just doing what Jesus would do. What Jesus has asked us to do. Ya know, just believe in the marriage. And so that is what I am hearing, and I am living this totally different life of, I am trying to get out of this marriage because I am dying." Maddy was forced into horrible choices: stay in her destructive marriage and die or leave and face spiritual and communal loss.

In her plea for survival and her desperation to escape, Maddy had an affair. This is the moment she describes as her shift in perspective.



I think the moment was when my marriage was crumbling, and I had sex with another lover even though we were married but not together. I remember allowing myself to have sex with this man and I completely disassociated myself but afterwards I just thought that was a huge rip off to even think that this is the worst thing in the world. It is an intimate sharing, but it isn't...I didn't feel less of a person...and I just thought...thank God. But I knew other people thought of me that way. And so here comes the lying and secrets and shame because no one can handle the truth of that or wants to hear that.

Maddy is surprised at her reaction to the affair. It did not destroy her internal sense of self in the way she thought it would. In fact, it empowered her,

I remember driving home after I had sex with the man I was having an affair with feeling so powerful like I can now do this. But it was like an amazing power even though the ego side of my brain was saying you are trash now so you might as well trash that your marriage too, the other soul true self felt enormous power.

Maddy had felt disempowered in her marriage with the man being the head of the house and not being allowed to “have an opinion.” She also felt trapped in her marriage by others around her not hearing her cries for help. When I asked her what she thought the power was that she felt, she responded, “I have options. I am not trapped. I can actually create the reality that I want. It is life changing. You are no longer trapped by these rules and mentalities. You are just free to be safe and do what is good for you.” Maddy had to fight hard to feel safe and do what was good for her. This included forcing herself into the position of being “trashed” in order to be free from the rules around her. She took desperate measures to be heard.

Maddy hid the affair because she had been told to keep quiet about her marital struggles, and as she predicted, her community brought shame and “could not handle the truth.” Maddy’s

pastor and supervisor found emails on her computer between her and the man she had been having an affair with. The pastor called a meeting with all of the staff and asked Maddy to come in. The two close friends she had attempted to confide in were there as well. They confronted her as a group. She did not describe the scene in our interview, but I know from other depictions, from both her and others, that it was a horrific and devastating encounter. They wanted her to call the man she had an affair with on speakerphone in front of everyone and end it. They also wanted to bring in her husband and children to tell them in public. Maddy's actions might have betrayed her marriage, but her church community saw it as a communal betrayal and wanted it to be dealt with publicly. She resisted and insisted that she tell her husband and children privately. She was let go of her position as youth pastor. She felt betrayed that the people in that room she had spent years with did not see her struggles and instead simply saw the affair. She notes her close friends, the two that had asked her not to share anymore, felt particularly betrayed by her secrecy even though they asked it of her. She notes,

They got mad that I didn't tell them I was having an affair. I wanted to. I remember wanting to not get into that affair and wishing I had my girlfriends to rely on. And so that was the most painful part of everything was losing them because they did not want me to tell the truth or be open or be receptive of it.

The loss of these friends was acutely painful for Maddy and seeing them in that room during the confrontation deeply wounded her.

At the same time, Maddy's community rejection also meant she was free to leave her husband. She describes, "I don't know that I could have gotten out of that marriage without me having an affair, deciding I was trash anyways, so I may as well trash my marriage. Like I have already pulled the bandaid off, so let's just blow the whole thing up." Now that she had been

fully revealed, she pulled the covers off all of the dark places. Revealing the lies to others also meant acknowledging the lies in her marriage,

Yeah, I think finally allowing myself to get divorced from Chris was the opening of me allowing all of the truth in because I stayed in a marriage based off of lies as well. Like this is unhealthy but every morning I have to brainwash myself to say that this is normal, this is fine, this is as healthy as it gets, and we are just going to keep trying to get healthier. When I was dealing with a man who had undiagnosed borderline personality disorder and depression and violent tendencies, but the church according to church standards, family first, focus on the family and basically the first commandment is stay married. I was going to win that trophy. I am going to do it. I am not a quitter. I am better than that.

We can hear in this statement the inner dialogue she used to keep herself in check and to encourage the lies. “I am not a quitter. I am better than that.” Instead of her self talk focusing on keeping herself safe or even considering her husband’s feelings, instead it was shame based and focused on not “quitting” the marriage. Keeping the marriage together, even using shame, was more important than her inner self being okay in the world.

A few months later, Maddy’s separated husband came to their house and took his life in their backyard. Instead of this action revealing the deep root of mental illness that fed their destructive relationship, it became another source of blame on Maddy because of her decision to leave. Maddy lost her friends, her community, her job, her partner for 15 years, and the father of her children.

Maddy does not regret her actions as she believes they saved her life, which is not something she says lightly. The eventual outcomes of her despair and feeling trapped were dire

to consider. She says,” I have to say I do not regret it. The biggest thing that I am ashamed of and that I regret because of the social consequences is the biggest thing I *don’t* regret in my life. How messed up is that?” Maddy believes that if her community had been more open to hearing about the truth of their situation, perhaps there might have been a different outcome. She traces the opportunities for a different outcome all the way back to the beginning of her marriage when she knows if they had time to date longer and live together, she might have discovered his mood swings and violent tendencies. Instead, they felt forced to marry quickly in order to get married as “virgins.”

The fullness of Maddy’s story and experiences sheds new light on the question her mother asked her about her virginity right before coming to the interview. It is revealing that her mother believed somehow her virginity or the loss of it might set into motion what was to come. It also resonates the deep shame attached to marriage and sex that Maddy was aware of and consequently hid. The shame was so great that even when she tried, others could not bear her shame or their complicity in it. They could not carry it with her. Instead, Maddy felt, consciously or unconsciously, compelled to move into embracing shame and ripping off the Band-Aid with her affair. Becoming “trash” allowed her to leave wearing what others perceive as that shame, but she found it empowering and necessary in order for her to live.

SARAH

*That was always a scary road for me because and honestly I would not truly allow myself to 100% question it until it happened to me...until I fell in love with a woman and then I was like, oh shit, this is actually love that I am feeling and it is not a perverted, twisted, infatuation, sexual thing.*

Sarah had an unconventional childhood, and in many ways, she continues to live an unconventional life now. Art, music, and performance have been outward expressions of not only her creativity, but also her devotion and love. Her family owned a traveling Christian circus when she was young. They traveled around the country, and Sarah learned the love of performance and the value of creativity. Even when they weren't performing, her family was committed to Christian ministry and made clear to Sarah that love was the motivator for all good things, a value that has guided Sarah's life both in and out of the church. During her childhood, she notes there were significant spiritual experiences that happened to her and her family that she still cannot explain. She gives as an example her family being out of food and money, and while praying, someone showed up at their front door with both. Her family believed in the supernatural, including physical healing. Because of this belief, they did not go to the doctor and would pray for healing if they were sick.

Growing up in ministry, Sarah was a passionate young believer, and this passion carried into her adulthood as she continued working in ministry into her late twenties until her life began to shift. Sarah is like the other participants in that she ultimately found her life and her desires did not fit the construct of Evangelicalism, but she is perhaps different in that she believes it is the positive core of those teachings related to love that ultimately led her to follow the path of her desires and to acknowledge who she was on a deeper level, embracing doubt and change.

When Sarah was in her twenties and working in ministry, she wrestled with whether or not she should be sexually celibate and single her whole life as often those in historical ministry and missions work were. Her aunt would always say to her when she was young that she should be a nun which Sarah attributes to her devotion to Christ and her lack of interest in dating. She eventually did date though and had her first male sexual partner around the age of twenty-five.

Sarah now can look back and see how even though she “freaked out” when she had sex with him, she also is able to see that she was “definitely already pushing the border, pushing the line that had been given to me previously like the fact that I was even doing anything sexually with him, I would never even thought of doing you know years before.” She discontinued this relationship as she did not see it going forward into the future and felt guilt over their sexual activities.

During her time in ministry, she met a woman with whom she shared a deep connection. Over time, she grew to fall in love with this woman, but the naming and meaning of what that meant was a powerful struggle for Sarah in relationship to what she knew were the rules regarding sexuality in the church. Although she had lost her virginity to a man, this act paled in comparison to the implications of her feelings for her friend. Like many of my participants, she wrestled with the constant need of these feelings while weighing her ability to “overcome” them and whether she even could or should conquer them. And if she could overcome them right now, was that approach sustainable or would she eventually need to further explore her sexuality?

This period of allowing herself to question and consider another path was life changing for Sarah. She is now able to see that she had doubts prior to this time, particularly about the queer community and homosexuality. She describes those early doubts,

The way I saw God was as love and being loving...so to have a teaching or a belief that was so against that way of thinking and feeling...I don't honestly think it ever set well with me even as a kid. It never quite made sense to me, so I don't know if there was a specific moment that I started to question it, but I think the questions were always there, but for me it was more like would I acknowledge my question enough to try to find an answer to it.

The imperative to acknowledge her questions became the defining act of change for Sarah. When she finally faced that she had feelings for her friend, she also had to face the belief dichotomy of her beliefs that said romantic love for a woman was wrong alongside her belief in a loving God. She describes,

That was always a scary road for me because and honestly I would not truly allow myself to 100% question it until it happened to me...until I fell in love with a woman and then I was like oh shit, this is actually love that I am feeling and it is not a perverted, twisted, infatuation, sexual thing. Actually, if I don't care if I ever have sex with her, I don't care. I am in love with her. When I started to feel that stuff for myself, I couldn't ignore the questions anymore and I had to face them and figure out what I truly felt and believed about it.

When Sarah's experience began to confirm some of her doubts and observations, she found she had to listen. She could no longer reconcile her feelings of love with the "perverted, twisted, infatuation, sexual thing" she had been told those feelings represented within someone. This period of truly questioning and facing her doubts and misgivings head on began one of the most painful periods of her life.

So, it was a hard time, so hard. Nothing about that was easy. I literally had to choose to completely let go of everything I knew and believed and open myself up to a new way of thinking like I felt like that was when I literally like that was when I questioned everything that I knew and consciously did and say, Ok, God, love source, I am open to what is actually true and then I think most people are really scared to do that.

Sarah spoke frequently throughout the interview about how disorienting and hard her questioning process was. She viewed that time period as one of the most painful of her life in having to

unravel the foundational truths she built her life upon. Peeling away all that that she had been told to think along with the thinking she had fashioned for herself based upon those beliefs and teachings was confusing and painful.

Part of what made her questioning process more acute was the pressure she received from her Christian roommates regarding her relationship. When they confronted her, she knew she could not lie to them, but she was not exactly sure where she stood on her beliefs.

They confronted me about it and like you know are you and her together Have you kissed or anything like that? They asked questions that weren't any of their business, but I really wasn't sure about what was going on, and so I told them what was going on and like crying and felt like...it was like one of the... it was a terrible experience. It was awful. But after that I was like you know what I just need to figure this out for myself.

Sarah spent the next month alone thinking, writing, “doodling,” and just trying to truly listen to what she thought and weigh that against what she wanted and her core beliefs. With a lifetime of listening to others, she removed those voices in order to hear herself clearly for the first time. She describes the place she arrive to, “I got to the point that was really basic but it's what I needed, which was your heart is... like you are coming from a truly innocent pure place and it is love and love is never a sin or negative thing and you just need to trust yourself and trust your relationship with me, with love, with God.” Sarah listened to her heart and chose to believe it was not a source of evil, but of love. She trusted that her heart was good and “innocent.” It was “pure,” not in the sexual way she had been taught, but in the way that she wanted to do good and love others. Eventually, Sarah came to the place where she decided to pursue the relationship and seek to explore and understand her sexuality in ways she had not considered before.



Even though Sarah came to a foundational place to make changes from, there was still relational and communal fallout. She described, “It affected every relationship I probably ever had that was significant to me. Absolutely. Like my ...those roommate relationships obviously it affected it enough where I had to move. I had to move somewhere else, but I didn't come out to my family for years.” Sarah had to move out of her home when she told her roommates about her lifestyle and relationship choice. She also did not tell her family about her changes for years. She said it was not until she moved back to her home state near her parents when she finally felt she had to tell them as they would be more aware of her day to day life. She said they still love her, but she also described that they might never come to her wedding someday or truly accept her romantic choices.

Unlike my other participants, Sarah did not walk away from her previous life feeling she had failed. Instead, she had chosen to listen to and follow her heart, which led her to having to face misalignments between her core beliefs and the system that assigned a right or wrong to love and relationships. She was not engaging in a “perverted, twisted, infatuation, sexual thing.” Instead, she fell in love. Sarah spent years unraveling her belief system and learning to listen to herself, which included addressing the shame that surrounded her interior life.

## CONCLUSION

Each of my participants told stories of moments when they came face to face with doubts and questions that no longer would be silenced. For all of them, those moments contained failure, confusion, empowerment, hope, resignation, and desperation. For all of them, the act of going public with their sexual experiences, whether voluntarily or forced, led them to truly face the discrepancies between the ways they felt compelled to live and the ‘right’ ways they were told they should be living. All of them identified that the sexual acts and relationships they had been

taught to fear were not actually that frightening once they engaged in them. Instead, they were mostly connecting, empowering, and life-giving. This experience taught them about fear itself and how it is powerful for control, but often is simply made up of fears based upon fears based upon fears. For all of them, this experience unraveled their long-term relationship with Christianity, and none still identify as believers even though they do recognize the importance of spirituality, connection, and kindness. They feel compelled to care for others, and most identified that in spite of their communities rejecting them, they learned how to be a good community member, loving and serving others well, through their experiences in the church.

Even though the stories of change my participants experienced did not directly address their educational experiences, we can see in their stories the cost of moving away from home discourse communities and cultures. John Paul Gee depicts the relationship between learning, language, being “right,” and discourse communities,

“At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language and surely not grammar, but *saying (writing)-doing, being-valuing-believing combinations*. These combinations I call ‘Discourses,’ with a capital ‘D.’...Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (Gee 526).

My participants worked hard to say and do the “right thing in the right way while playing the right social role” for most of their young lives. We can see in their stories how much it cost them to move away from this “right” way of being in their Evangelical worlds, and it begs the question

what does it cost our students when we ask them to engage in academic Discourse that might carry values that are contrary to their home values.

Even more importantly perhaps to consider is the ways we ask them to perform in the “right” way for us, and how we simply come to replicate the same systems of power and control they already operate in. What we can learn from their stories of real change and moving to a new community is that their change was very internal and required a sense of abandonment to a known path and future. I want to say this abandonment is willful, but it is sometimes forced by others in their communities. They were not necessarily leaving one community to join another; instead, they identify the immediate other side of change and the process of unraveling as profoundly painful and disorienting. It is an undoing of a foundation. We can learn that it takes time, sometimes years or even decades, to say it is worth it. This is important as we consider what it means for our students who *do* choose to move out of their home communities, sometimes for the first time. The unraveling process happens in layers and moments. Each knot of truth you believed has to be carefully looked over and deemed worthy for untying, keeping, or retying to a new end.

## CHAPTER 5 - INTELLECTUAL WORK: PROTECTION, CONTROL, AND LITERACY

*I remember when the realization set into me that learning had different meanings for me. At the time, I could not have articulated why it meant something different for me, but over the years, I came to see that being a girl set a certain trajectory for me within the Evangelical construct.*

*I was in elementary school and attended a vacation Bible school with my friends at their local church. On the day we arrived in the church lobby, I saw this life-size spaceship. It was built out of wood and had working lights and buttons. It was the ultimate playhouse. Four or five kids could fit into it at a time, and dozens of kids waited in line to go inside. The noises and lights cast a spell on the room and juiced every kid up with the same kind of adrenaline we felt at a local fair with all the rides lit up and beeping. I desperately ran for the line.*

*And then I found out that this spaceship was the prize for the student who memorized the most memory verses over the week. I had a notion that I might be smart. At least, I knew school was easy, and it was not always that way for my peers. I decided I would try to win this spaceship.*

*The first night I memorized every verse on the list for that day and then all of the extra credit verses. The next night I memorized the rest of the week's verses. All of the following nights they created new lists for me to memorize. I don't know the total number of verses I memorized, but I know that the last two nights I memorized around 60 each night. It took so long to recite them all each day that as the other kids headed to chapel, the teacher and I would remain in our classroom while I finished. By this time, the spaceship was not my motivation. Instead, I found myself filled with wonder that I could do so much when I really pushed my mind. I felt high on this new knowledge about myself, and it made me excited that I might be unique and different from my peers.*

*I knew another boy in the camp also was vying for the win. We were neck and neck, so on the last day, I was not sure whether or not we had actually won. Just in case, I wore my favorite dress with matching shoes. I was excited, and I was proud, but I also checked this feeling, knowing that being proud was not a positive quality, particularly in a young girl.*

*That morning I overheard parents and teachers talking about the contest. I overheard them say that the boy's Dad had created the spaceship, and they had assumed he would win it when they donated it for the contest. The family would be upset if he didn't win. Their words settled in me: why would a girl want the spaceship anyway? Why does she care? People were upset with me.*

*Their words were so contrary to how I felt inside that I felt like I was floating as I sat on the wooden pew in the middle of the church waiting to hear the results. When they called my name, I felt immediate shame about what I had done. Who do I think I was? Why did I dare do something that would upset everyone? I was a show-off. Did I even really care about the spaceship? I walked up front to the stage looking at the fancy shoes I had worn. I felt stupid for wearing my best dress. Everyone else was in shorts and t-shirts.*

*In that moment, I knew that my brain's ability, particularly my acknowledgement of it, was shameful. I needed to know my place. I should be meek and humble. It was the first moment when I knew that being smart, especially as a girl, might cost me something. I was not sure I wanted to pay that cost. I wanted to be liked more than I wanted people to know I was smart.*

I could not have told you specifically the formula of words or actions that told me as a girl my intelligence did not matter, but that intuitive knowledge was present throughout my life. As I grew older, the gendered directives became more overt. As a girl, intelligence and using it as a tool for learning and achievement did not matter when my highest calling as a Christian

woman was to become a wife and full-time mother. Achievement and investment in a career were the concerns of men as they needed to provide for their families. This sort of thinking was powerful enough that I did not go to college out of high school in spite of being a very strong student in one of the best schools in our home state. None of my teachers knew that I would not go to college. It was just assumed that I would, but there was not money to send a girl to college. I had also internalized this narrative in a way that I did not think it was worth the investment either. I did not go to college until I was thirty with three kids.

The same essence of control exercised in Evangelicalism in sexuality makes its way into every facet of life, including education and learning. In this chapter, I tell the story of two of my participants, Josh and Ben, whose relationship with education and learning emerged profoundly in our interviews, even with them being pointed at sexuality. Although gender-based rules and trajectories did not play as powerful a role in their lives as in mine, their stories depict the ties between the control enacted in sexuality likewise enacted in learning.

## JOSH AND BEN

At 15, Josh could not read.

I mean I don't know if you can imagine this, but it's horribly embarrassing not being able to read. Like at 15 years old, I couldn't really read. If you gave me a book, I could pick some words out, but I couldn't read.

Perhaps, Josh still would not be able to read if his paternal grandmother had not stepped in when he was 15 to tutor him and his nine other siblings, threatening to call Child Protective Services if the educational trajectory of her grandchildren did not change. He and his siblings were homeschooled for religious reasons, but for the most part their parents neglected their education. The practical ramifications of not being able to read are too obvious to mention, but Josh talks

about the emotional toll it had on him,

If you have friends and peers that go to the same church as you or are in the same sphere that you know they can read a street sign or they can read an advertisement for this or that or they can read directions, and you can't, you know. So, for example, playing the game Balderdash, I was terrified of being drawn into certain games that involved any reading whatsoever. So, it was a huge point of shame for me. I felt stupid. I mean looking back at it now, I had nothing to do with that. It was completely the failure of my parents to educate, but yet it was horribly embarrassing. I would go out of my way and come up with alternatives as far as like games to play. I would say, no, I don't like Balderdash, or any game that would require some reading somehow.

Josh was the third out of ten children. He characterized his family as “highly isolated.” He started talking about how his mom was the one in charge and raised the kids...and then he paused...said, “It's like you know you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. But on the sidelines, you can cut that horse off from any other water source for years, and they are eventually going to dip their foot in.” His mother cut Josh and his siblings off from outside influences - school, friends, and media - all with the purpose of protecting them from anything or anyone that did not share their Evangelical faith. He wavered back and forth between normalizing the control his mother administered as a thing a lot of other Christians do, but then also would pause and talk about how it bordered on abuse and many of the other older siblings had to “rescue” the others later on once they got out.

Ben was also homeschooled for religious reasons, but his story reflects perhaps a more “normal” homeschool experience. He attended kindergarten at a public school, and he vaguely remembers his parents becoming concerned when his schoolteacher encouraged him to have

imaginary friends. His parents did not approve of imaginary friends as they thought they were related to magic, which was “evil.” The following year he started homeschooling. He notes this move coincided with the “homeschool movement” and that many others in their church began homeschooling around this time as well. In high school, his parents decided they were not equipped to properly teach him in subjects such as advanced science and math, so they convinced the public-school board to allow him to attend part time for those subjects while continuing humanities and religious teaching at home. Ben felt that his homeschooling experience academically prepared him for public school, but the fear of evil enculturated in him and his parents’ efforts to isolate from negative influences impacted his life.

## EVANGELICALS AND INTELLECTUAL WORK

There are two overarching aspects to my dissertation inquiry. One is to explore the costly change associated with Evangelicals shifting their sexual beliefs and practices away from heteronormative and purity based religious teachings. Part of the impetus for this exploration on costly change was my observation that teachers were finding Christian students did not engage in critical learning in the ways other students did, and Christian’s also often operated in adversarial ways in the classroom when asked to consider new perspectives and critically question their experiences and sources of information. Mathew Miller and Paul Lynch published in a 2017 issue of *Present Tense* a two-hundred-piece bibliography charting the last 25 years of writing focused on religion and composition. In their overview, they noted that the *dominant* dialogue was around whether or not religious students are seen as problems or resources in the writing classroom (303-4). Miller and Lynch open with a Keith Gilyard quote from his book *Composition and Cornel West* saying, “I doubt that high-volume creativity is going to flow from fundamentalist or evangelical students. Their religiosity tends not to be of the prophetic, social



ameliorative type but the conservative, George W. Bush type.” (57). In further exploring the context of Gilyard’s statement, he is responding to being torn between two disparate notions. On the one hand, there are the sharp critiques of composition scholars, such as Amy Goodburn and Lizabeth A. Rand, that composition studies, in particular critical pedagogy, offers its own ‘salvation message.’ Rand notes, “Our [compositionists] testimonials suggest that we desperately want our students to “get saved” - to get outside themselves so that a life-changing transformation can occur” (360). Both Goodburn and Rand press on the notion that critical pedagogy in its critiques of Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism fails at times to see how it is enacting its own form of pedantic evangelizing. Goodburn notes, “To say that time and experience will give students a way to reconceptualize their ideas also seems a bit arrogant, especially when some fundamentalist students' experiences often are that of constantly defending their beliefs from dominant discourse, even those that invoke liberatory goals.” (350). On the other side of these critiques, Gilyard notes that it is not that scholars are against the theological stances of Christians. Instead, scholars “abhor” the role of Conservative Christians in far-right politics. He notes, “I have several friends in the profession trying to save my soul so they can deliver it to the Republican party” (58). The tension Gilyard writes in was over twelve years ago in 2008, and I would argue that it represents a dynamic that is even more pervasive now with increased polarization. The trouble with this dynamic is that Gilyard is allowing his own personal and political “abhorrence” towards broader religious political involvements, specifically he cites in relationship to colleagues, to impact his approach towards composition students (typically freshman) as lacking “high volume creativity” because of their religious affiliations.

Heather Thomas-Bunn in her article “Mediating Discursive Worlds” describes her more recent 2017 study with forty instructors regarding their experiences with Christian students in the

writing classroom. She found that lack of critical thinking was the number one of four primary issues instructors had with Christian students. The other three complaints were audience awareness, appropriate use of evidence, and tolerance. She described these four critiques as ways that Christian students do not conform to academic norms. One of the participants from Thomas-Bunn's study said regarding Christians and critical thinking, "[I]t's hard to steer them away from making religious arguments if they are religious and I don't feel like I want to spend my time, as a teacher, getting into that discussion. It gets way too into content and way far away from writing, and partly because I just don't think that most of them are capable of doing the intellectual work to really look at the issue" (280). This quote highlights two important aspects of this conversation. First, it asks us to consider if it is possible to focus on just writing in the classroom, which many critical pedagogues and scholars would say no (Gee, Freire, hooks). Secondly, it correlates a reticence to look at certain issues as an intellectual labor incapability. This blanket labeling of creative and intellectual incapability based upon religious affiliation should give educators pause.

Through the stories of my participants in this chapter, I will challenge the viewpoint of Evangelicals as lacking "high volume creativity" as well as being incapable of doing "intellectual work." The same system of Evangelical control that impacts sexuality extends to educational and learning experiences. In the same way sexual literacy was controlled and carefully molded, literacy more broadly was also controlled and carefully molded. As we look at the individual, communal, and eternal costs of changing sexual beliefs and practices, we also begin to see the ways religious control makes learning in general costly, particularly in the area of critical thinking and engagement with material that is contrary to their belief systems. I specifically demonstrate that my participants are deeply impacted by the parental control enacted

over their education, and show the individual labor and personal deep reflection it took to increase their own literacy and to critically explore the ways their experiences of educational control impacted their ways of thinking and learning. Throughout their stories, one can hear the ways they wrestled with notions of power and control as they recognize and further seek to understand the impact of their parents enforcing these harmful systems in the name of protection, care, and love.

In this chapter, I will explore the three facets of educational control depicted in my participants' stories: (1) knowledge sourced from outside the faith system including media and educational curriculum; (2) the social condition of learning (being with others outside of family and faith group); and (3) the system of learning itself (questioning, theorizing, etc.). Before I begin looking specifically at my participant's experiences, I look at the ways critical thinking has been defined in the academic sphere and how it is at times approached by Christians as well as looking at the ways literacy itself is culturally situated.

## CRITICAL THINKING

### *Why Care About Critical Thinking?*

School is not the only place perspective shifting or critical thinking takes place, but as educators, we often seek to broaden student's experiences and deepen their writing through this practice. bell hooks in her book *Teaching to Transgress* talks about her experience with the opportunities education gave her to "try on" different perspectives or identities and some of both the "pleasure and danger" in that process. She shares varying experiences from "sheer joy" in school to it becoming another place of conformity and obedience to yet another set of standards. She notes, "School was the place of ecstasy - pleasure and danger" (3). The danger comes from as she says, "to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place

oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I should be." (3). School offered her the opportunity to "forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself" (3). This reinvention and exploration brought pleasure and joy, but even in the midst of that, hooks knew there was danger to that pleasure which might lead her to change the image of who she was supposed to be by her home standards. At the same time, hooks talks about ways that education at times simply demanded another version of conformity and where education's primary purpose became to teach obedience.

Hooks encourages teachers to create a space where reinvention and joy can take place. She says, "...our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in this manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (13). She notes that adopting the imperative for deep learning in her teaching has caused her to "interrogate" the mind/body split that often underlies many pedagogical practices (18). Students and people are not able to separate their minds from their bodies and simply gain a neutral set of knowledge and technical mastery. All learning is housed within our bodies and all of the 'home' that our bodies carry with us. To ignore the dynamics our bodies and homes bring, we further the negative role education has played in teaching conformity rather than engagement.

### *Defining Critical Thinking*

The idea of the mind/body split has historically had a strong correlation with early yet prevailing definitions of critical thinking. Critical thinking at times is viewed as the ability to separate logic from emotion and experience in order to try and gain the most objective viewpoint, a viewpoint that will allow one to engage in accurate assessment of situations and

consider multiple approaches without emotional charge or attachment. It is no mystery, and almost unnecessary to cite in its common knowledge, that education historically has considered logic as the basis of valid epistemologies while context, emotion, and story are considered as less valid. Critical thinking has been used to operationalize these commitments to logic-based epistemologies.

Over the years though, people have challenged the logocentric definition of critical thinking. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explores the concept of critical thinking both as it is considered in society, public discourse, and political action, but also how it is used pedagogically. The broadest definition they offer is “careful goal-directed thinking,” but the article goes on to note that each word in that definition has been scrutinized, contextualized, and problematized by scholars for decades. What does careful mean? What is a worthy goal? How directed is directed? What counts as thinking? The article then goes on to describe over 31 different definitions or versions of critical thinking as described by scholars over the last hundred years. With critical thinking’s nebulous and shifting nature, how do we use it in the classroom and how is this term used to deem some students intellectually capable and engaged while others not?

Kal Alston in her article “Re/thinking Critical Thinking: The Seductions Of Everyday Life” discusses the uses of the term “critical thinking” and the mind/body split. She describes this split in terms of ethics:

The connections between knowing and feeling/desiring/doing are complex. I want, however, to insist that critical thinking that reads arguments, texts, or practices merely on the surface without connections to feeling/desiring/doing or action lacks an ethical depth that should infuse the difference between mere cognitive activity and something we want

to call critical thinking. Those connections (or lack thereof) resonate in our relations to self and to others. (34)

Critical thinking taking the form as mind separated from the body Alston terms simply “cognitive activity,” and this definition of critical thinking becomes unethical when we use that supposed objectivity in relationship to human connection and complex thinking. With perspective shifting representing not only a relationship to ideas, but a relationship to self and others, it is unethical to not take positionality into account in our thinking processes. She further describes this relationship, “Criticality is not solely an evaluative strategy aimed at the “other” but a means of attending to meaning as it circulates. It requires the ability to weave a pastiche of one’s own interests out of experience, reactions, understanding of self and other.” (38). Criticality itself is not engaging in a binary of evaluating whether an “other” thought or perspective is true or untrue, right or wrong. It is also not a seeking to try on and imitate an “other” in order to evaluate. Instead criticality pays attention to how meaning is being made through acknowledging the role of our personal interests and experiences with our attempts to understand how meaning is contextually circulated and created for others.

Alston notes that to operate out of this more holistic thinking calls us to specifically examine identity, social roles, and even ideology. Instead of removing those aspects of our thinking, they become cyclical in the ways they impact and are impacted by critical thinking. She notes,

Critical thinkers will, on this account, be attuned to the varieties of human problems, human understanding, as well as communication and interaction. They will be able to see the obstacles to meaning making not solely in acquiring the demonstrable skills of logic or rhetoric but in being able to work through the struggles of coping with identity, social roles,

social representation, and ideology – much of which underlies their daily experiences from childhood on. (38).

It is important to examine the obstacles to meaning making in relationship to my participants as they wrestle with identity, ideology, social roles, and social representation. The obstacles are not simply the need to acquire sounder logic, greater rhetoric, or an increased capability for intellectual labor. Nor, are those the end goals per se of criticality. When we ask our students to critically think and engage with other perspectives, we ethically need to encourage them to consider their own positionality, social roles, identities, and ideologies instead of asking them to lay them aside for a more “logical” and detached evaluation.

What becomes challenging with considering and acknowledging a student's particular experiences and contexts is that religiously prescribed identity as well as social roles and representation often stand in stark contrast to academic norms of identities that are socially and intellectually acceptable. This conflict between religious and academic norms, if unrecognized by educators, can result in further isolation and withdrawal from critical thinking, much as the participant from Thomas-Bunn’s study referenced earlier characterized as a lack of “capability to do intellectual work” (280). One could venture that Christian students perhaps recognize that mind and body cannot be split with their imperative and emphasis on the heart and thoughts intricately attached to their bodies and experiences, which is often why certain information and exposures can be considered “dangerous.” Their lives and ideology instinctively recognize the connection between mind and body. They recognize the process and impact of critical thinking does not simply take place in a classroom vacuum but has real world impact and ramifications. Goodburn notes, “Conservative educators (and conservative students as well) do understand that reading and writing are sociopolitical acts.” She goes on to say that because their “social matrixes” do not

match our academic norms, “their interpretations are considered naive and uncritical.” (349). She goes on to note that instead of Christians theorizing in terms “of social differences such as race, class, gender” as we might in the academy, “they believe that their web of reality- one that theorizes in terms of secular and religious-based differences - is the most useful in understanding and critiquing educational practices.” (349). Because reading and writing is a sociopolitical, embodied, and communal act, one that is theorized in terms of secular or religious (believing or unbelieving) dichotomies, for Christian students then, critical thinking and learning in general, carries communal, personal, and eternal ramifications.

### *The Problem with Critical Thinking*

With theorizing in terms of secular or religious-based differences, Christians perhaps will approach and view different viewpoints in ways that do not necessarily match our academic expectations or norms. Thomas-Bunn incorporates the work of Douglas Downs into her work where he describes that Christian students work within what he calls a discourse of affirmation versus what academia might call a discourse of inquiry. Downs and I both take some liberty with equating the academic norm of critical thinking with inquiry, but practices of honest probing and searching apply to both. A discourse of inquiry “favors questioning, pursuit of new knowledge and understanding, desire to analyze and synthesize, curiosity” (42). In contrast, a discourse of affirmation receives and learns from a body of knowledge that contains what they would consider foundational truths. They affirm given information rather than find this information through inquiry. Instead, Downs notes that Christian students resist questioning or even different knowledge that would undermine what they perceive and believe as the foundation of their learning, truth, and lives.



I would perhaps describe this foundation of truth or a set of claims from Christian discourse, not necessarily as a boundary to new knowledge, but as a site or even a theoretical lens against which all inquiry is examined. Christians implicitly trust (and many have been intensely immersed in this way of thinking from their home communities their whole lives) that their lens based on Christian beliefs, particularly in the inerrancy of the Bible, is more “true” in the same way a carpenter would characterize an exact, balanced line. Their own individual perceptions and interpretations of inquiry are fallible and not to be trusted in the same way a carpenter would not simply trust his eyesight to measure a true line. Academic inquiry or critical thinking then in their minds is a useless intellectual labor because what they find and interpret on their own it is not necessarily ‘true’ and can threaten real truth (ironically, this threat or fear implies a lack of faith that God can’t use their own insight). Sarah Jennifer Mulnex in her article exploring how to define and teach critical thinking notes critical thinking relies on a certain measure of autonomous inquiry, “Critical thinking is, then, closely tied to the development of autonomy, or the *ability to decide for ourselves what we believe according to our own deliberations and not on the basis of what others claim.*” (473). (Italics Mine) Christian students operate out of the system that they have already decided what they believe, so they do not need to engage in thinking practices to develop *new* meanings (although they might seek to enhance existing ones). In addition, they actively lay aside their own deliberations as they are flawed in their abilities (see more in Chapter 3 regarding doubt and controlling the mind) in lieu of *intentionally* relying on what “others claim,” specifically the Bible. Any other sources deemed outside the faith are seen as not necessarily ‘true’ and need to be vetted against and through the Christian theoretical lens. This also backs up Thomas-Bunn’s notice of teacher’s complaints that students improperly use evidence because they use the Bible or faith-based evidence that

*requires* a belief in it in order to be valid (266-8). With instructors equating a Christian student's way of thinking or belief systems to an incapability to do intellectual work, Christian students resist as they intuit a lack of respect for their truth as well as the intimation that adherence to their beliefs implies a lack of intellect, or in short, that they are 'stupid' or 'ignorant.'

When we ask students to examine different perspectives as a mode for change, growth, and shifting, we are asking some of them to experience a loss (Britzman). The idea of control and loss undergirds both sexuality and learning. Literacy and control are also related, but typically literacy is conferred or withheld by the powerful to control and maintain the power hierarchy, which is contextual and unique to different communities. Literacy studies has acknowledged the ways home literacies and discourse communities, including religious communities, impact learning and access to power (Heath, Ben-Yosef, Chavez, Davila, King, Kohl, Johnson). Literacy, according to Collins and Blot, complicates power dynamics by problematizing the viewpoint that education equals salvation and acknowledging that acts of reading and writing involve "dynamics of class, gender, and race" (7). Kirk Branch, in his article "What No Literacy Means" notes that literacy denied becomes a "tool for the powerful" (54). As educators we talk about the powers of gaining literacy while ignoring the "political effectiveness of *restricting* literacy as a tool of social control" (56) (*Italics mine*). Ben - Josef in her article "Literacy and Power: The Shiyour as a Site of Subordination and Empowerment for Chabad Women" discusses her study with a Jewish shiyour for women, noting the ways literacies were taught and withheld maintained specific gender roles. She describes literacy practices as "historically situated, embedded in social institutions and power relationships" and developed through shared "cognitions, ideologies, and sociocultural identities" which are reinforced through shared texts and discourse. (57) The practices of the Jewish group she studied alongside

discourse and literacy theories, “suggests that literacy, language, and power are so intertwined that education for a specific literacy is always a political act” (58). Anytime literacy is restricted in certain areas and promoted in others, it is a political act. Literacy is wound up in personal and communal identity, and alongside its power dynamics, literacy acts as a gatekeeping mechanism to social advancement with the assumption that more literacy equals more advancement. But in the case of my participants, the gatekeeping and withholding literacy is designed to prevent the “salvation” education represents which acts as a threat to their communal identity. This begs the question: what kind of salvation is education offering that my participants’ communities fear, so much so that they withheld certain aspects of education in order to protect them?

## HOMESCHOOLING

With critical thinking and its commitment to autonomy and understanding how meaning circulates in context alongside the social institutions and political investments in literacy and learning, some Evangelical parents decide secular and/or public education does not emphasize the kind of learning that is desirable to cultivate a Christian life. At best, secular education might distract from important values of community and self-sacrifice. At worst, the values of secular education are dangerous for eternal salvation and life. Because of these dangers, Christian parents may decide to homeschool for at least some period of time. 4 out of 5 of my study participants were homeschooled for at least a couple of years of their education (the other 1 attended private Christian schools). Robert Kunzman in his article, “Homeschooling and Religious Fundamentalism” describes some of the issues Evangelicals have with public and or secular based schooling. Kunzman notes that the choice to homeschool is impacted by several core principles: resistance to contemporary culture; suspicion of institutional authority and professional expertise; parental control and centrality of family; and interweaving of faith and

academics. He further details each of these imperatives for Christian cultural control of education. The stories of my participants demonstrate each of these facets in their educational experiences. These core principles are important to note because most Evangelical college students, homeschooled or not, have been exposed to them in varying degrees and some might be negotiating these principles as they engage in activities in our classrooms.

One of the main means for educational control for my participants was in the realm of access to outside information and flow of knowledge, much of which we take for granted as a cultural interpretive lens formed during childhood that impacts our shared experiences in the world. Withholding of information particularly showed up in access and control in media and educational curriculum. In this section, I will talk about the different ways my participants experienced informational control while exploring the impetus and impact of this control. Following this section, I will discuss the ways social conditions of learning and literacy were prescribed. Ultimately, looking at these systems of control will offer us a better understanding of the Evangelical cultural background of literacy and learning as well as the ways the mind is mapped for control impacts students' relationship to autonomous learning and critical thinking. Through these stories, we will also see the relational and emotional motivations for adhering to Evangelical rules and ways of thinking as well as the costs of seeking to satisfy natural curiosities and engage in typical adolescent identity formation through learning and working alongside peers.

### *Media*

On the most basic level, all of my participants, myself included, experienced some version of restricted access to television. Perhaps, many children, no matter the impetus behind it, experience some level of curated viewing, but my participants recognized, even while they were

children, that their access was particularly limited and scripted in its nature. Generations can collectively point to certain television shows that shaped their youth often sharing these cultural markers as a bonding mechanism.

Ubiquitously among my participants, any television show that involved an element of witchcraft and the supernatural was restricted, such as the *Smurfs* and Disney productions. *Smurfs* had the warlock character Gargamel, and Disney movies, such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, had witches that cast spells. Even though many of these characters were portrayed as evil, they normalized witchcraft and downplayed its power with cartoon depictions designed for children's entertainment. Ben further was not allowed to watch anything with talking animals because God did not create them that way and it was an "evil thing." Ben describes his feelings as a young person seeing his parents react in such strong ways to seemingly normalized peer experiences of cartoon watching, "I just remember there being a lot of evil in the world basically and it kind of painted a scary picture." Others who did watch were unconsciously potential victims of this evil, and my participants' parents sought to protect them from the unknowing control of evil forces present in child entertainment. All of this evil was part of forces contrary to God ultimately manifested in the form of Satan. God and Satan are in a constant battle over the souls and lives of all people on earth, even young children. The knowledge that even Satan used cartoons for his purposes in harming children created a feeling that there was a "lot of evil in the world" hidden all around us.

Ben alternated between humorous and reflective as he describes his childhood experiences with television restrictions. He was only allowed to watch Christian programming, such as *Gospel Bill* and *Joy Junction*, on the Public Broadcast Station (PBS), and he describes his mother leaving the room and switching back and forth to other cartoons. At 12, he took the

portable television into the bathroom, pretending to take a shower, so he could watch *Saved by the Bell*. Ben also intermingled his conversation around television with language restrictions to demonstrate how “stupid” and innocuous he felt these restrictions actually were. He and his siblings were not allowed to say, “deviled eggs” and instead had to say, “angel eggs.” They were not allowed to say, “get up and at em” because “em” sounded like “in Adam,” and Adam was carnal. Ben notes that even as a child he thought there were so many “normal things that we had to change” which did not impact his relationship with God and instead it was because there was “a whole thing about sounding Christian.”

Josh also was not allowed to watch secular television and his mother physically removed the antennas from the television so she could regulate what was watched. There was no sneaking around his mother. He notes they were only allowed to watch PBS occasionally and an Evangelical channel that played Christian cartoons. He correlates this level of control with mental health, “She controlled the information stream like a crazy person. I think she is crazy.” His mother was consumed with this control in a way that even he was aware was not healthy. This level of media control consumed his mother in such a way that it acted as one of the factors that pointed towards her unbalanced mental health.

Even though we were reflecting years later and at times laughing in these conversations about television and shared Evangelical discourse, what came up again and again was the early awareness that there was a gap in the information between what they received and what their peers received and that there was an outside “evil” in the world. They also were aware that this fear contrasted with some of their natural inclinations. Ben describes, “Well it started very early trying to hide natural curiosity about the world. Because I wasn't allowed.” In spite of his sneaking television, he learned to self-regulate early and feel guilty about his actions. Part of it

was “fear of getting into trouble,” but the other part was “fear of going to hell.” The inclination to explore his “natural curiosity” about the world became mixed with guilt and fear. Others outside this circle of restriction were in harm’s way, and staying away from cultural information, albeit in the form of entertainment, would keep him safer from evil and even hell.

Television marked the conversation around early awareness of their difference from their peers, and both Ben and Josh directly led to discussing an early noticing of the ironies in these restrictions. They both notably used the example of Sunday mornings before church. Ben describes on Sunday mornings they would fight horribly trying to get ready for church, and they would all be so angry that they would not speak in the car. The impetus for these fights that set them apart from other mornings preparations was the emphasis on appearance. Ben describes showing up to church “pretty” because they always sat in the second row where they would be seen by many. Ben was aware that showing up good looking was a performance for others while the reality was, they had committed many ‘sins’ getting into that performance. These types of sins, such as anger and harming one another, were not as important as looking pretty, and that somehow the outward performance of being pretty pointed towards a more robust faith.

The notion of playing a part showed up on Sunday mornings for Josh as well. Josh notes his mother found family physical appearances acted for church members as a representation of her identity and success as a mother. He says,

I guess her self-esteem was based on this ‘mother of many.’ You know, a Mary kind of figure, and she had all these kids. She just looked the part, and all the church ladies loved her. So, appearances were huge for her and acceptances. That's where she got her validation, external validation, from.

Even though Josh's family fought on Sunday mornings to foster outward appearances and his mother exerted a substantial amount of control to make that happen, the appearances were ultimately what mattered over the damage done in the process. And for Josh's mom, her family's appearance and her role as a mother was her source of personal validation.

Perhaps, one would not imagine cartoons and Sunday mornings go hand in hand, but this contrast brought an early awareness that performance hides darker realities, but some performances were accepted while others were not. Some covered "silly" evils while others covered what was truly harmful, and ironically, the ones more controlled were the ones that, even as young children, they recognized as unnecessary and less harmful. But it built into them the knowledge that performance is sometimes necessary for approval, and the performance of the reluctant horse drinking water as Josh described hid individual private lives of desiring broader cultural experiences from a place of curiosity. Satisfying this curiosity required giving the outside performance to their parents of adhering to their sometimes "silly" restrictions while hiding their explorations and interests. This led to the beginnings of an inward life of sneaking around, but also early guilt about feeling different not only from the outside world, but also to those closest to them in their families. This difference needed to be hidden, which in many ways began a system of internal isolation and loneliness that would act as seeds for later desperation for connection. Eventually, revealing the truth behind their performances would lead to rejection from their communities.

### *Educational Curriculum*

Control of information moved beyond media and into educational content and experience. Both Ben and Josh were very aware that they were homeschooled out of a sense of protection from spiritual influences and forces as well as contamination from secular information. Ben's parents



at least considered the necessity of preparation for college and that his homeschooling curriculum needed to prepare him for success outside of their religious community. In contrast, Josh's family did not make an effort to ensure his education was comparable to his peers. Josh describes,

Controlling the information stream was much more the emphasis on what my education was about. It wasn't about teaching me to read. It wasn't about setting me up for success. I don't think that thought even entered her mind. I think it was all about keeping her kids from being contaminated or keeping it sanitary than actually setting them up for a successful life and raising adults instead of children.

One piece of the homeschool experience is the curriculum itself which Ben and Josh both discussed. For most subjects, Ben used a curriculum called *Rod and Staff*, which is a Mennonite and Amish based curriculum distributed by Milestone Books. He also used *Bob Jones University Press* for his Math curriculum. Upon reflection, Ben felt the curriculum reflected a Christian worldview of history and science, for example, "the founding fathers were saints of sorts" and creation was the "only option in science." At the same time, he relayed that his curriculum was considered one of the more challenging among homeschool communities, and he even felt ahead of his peers when he eventually took classes in high school.

In contrast, Josh characterized his curriculum, called PACE - Packet of *Accelerated Christian Education* (published by a company bearing the same name) and sometimes it is often shortened to simply ACE, as "highly, highly inaccurate" with what he characterized as "junk science" also based on creation. Social studies focused on the life of missionaries, various martyrs, and leaders in the faith instead of public, political, and social history. He says, "It's a completely one-sided form of history. It is kind of like a brainwashing curriculum. And it has all

sorts of criticism from the education system at large. It is a horrible curriculum. It's brainwashing your children really and that is what my school was." He notes the curriculum also criticized and held messages decrying other secular educational systems, further isolating through creating a distrust of other systems, which he noted he continues to struggle against this embodied fear of learning in classrooms even today.

One can see the line of thinking that undergirds the curriculum's primary purpose of cultivating Christians in online reviews at "Ace Reviews" for the curriculum... One woman writes,

It's very important to me that they [my children] aren't like the world, and entirely about loving God, serving Him and others, no matter what they grow up to be. God is the center. ACE helps keep us focused on the Lord along with our studies. (Natali).

This positive review of ACE's curriculum reinforces the correlation between control of literacy in the name of Christian ideologies to raise children that are not "like the world," and the primary purpose of education is to act as a support for cultivating a focus on God with broader education studies coming second. Even with the curriculum's educational weaknesses acknowledged, it is deemed more important to be Godly as seen in this review, "People complain about the grammar but ACE was made to raise Christian leaders who know how to write and speak clearly so that they can be leaders in their various fields." (Linda). It is unclear from this statement if grammar is worth sacrificing for the greater good of raising Christian leaders or if the grammar the curriculum provides is enough for what Christian leaders might need for writing and speaking clearly (even if it is not enough for the naysayers). Either way, there is an acknowledgement that there are more vital and larger purposes being fostered and taught in the curriculum than good grammar. Both of these reviews speak to the goal of education is to be a "Christian leader" and

not “like the world,” and a strong subject education is worth sacrificing for that primary goal. In Josh’s life, with being deprived of outside media and having restricted social interactions, this system of learning and its brainwashing went for the most part unchallenged.

As of 2019, the PACE curriculum is still utilized as a homeschooling curriculum as well as used in various private schools. It was written in 1974, and by most accounts, much of the material has remained the same (aceministries.com). The curriculum consists of individual workbooks that are independently completed with self or parent graded quizzes at the end. Much of the content, particularly in the early years, is relayed in cartoon style. Descriptions of schools that use the curriculum describe students sitting in cubicles while using the workbooks. Because the curriculum has been around for so many years, some of the online reviews were from adults who had used the curriculum as children, and they echo Josh’s experience with subject content, but also his subsequent insecurities about learning. One reviewer described her experience during her learning period and then going to college,

I did their literature courses and liked it at the time—read a whole bunch of missionary biographies, since that’s what I’d dreamed of being forever. But in college I realized I hadn’t been exposed to ANY classical literature and was so disappointed. There’s always adulthood to explore that stuff, but I felt so stupid and not well read. (Leah)

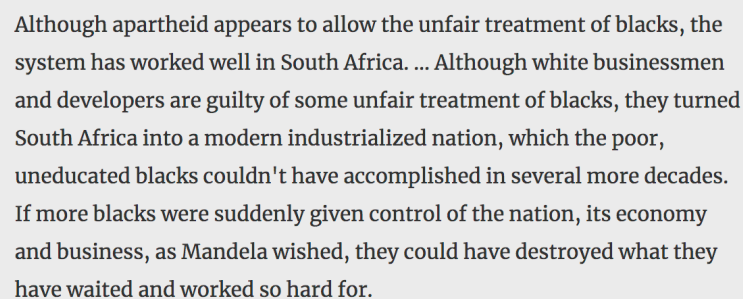
Another blog participant described what it was like using the curriculum in both the private and homeschooling setting. This particular person describes it even in light of her own child’s educational experience in public school.

I attended a private ACE school from 1st-12th grade. As I attended college, I was astounded at how much science and history this curriculum chooses to leave out. It only teaches one very conservative Christian view. Honestly, I felt like I had been lied to and

robbed of the basic education that is required by public education. I was also homeschooled for part of my education and this experience also robbed me of a normal education. A normal education where a child can learn social skills and receive the learning necessary to be successful in higher education situations. I struggled in math and science even in college because the “paces” were lacking in information and teaching technique. I had never been in the usual classroom setting until college since every child is required to sit in a cubical by themselves. My daughter attended public school and is doing great, about to graduate from college. Please do not subject your children to a second-rate education by homeschooling or using the ACE curriculum. (Sarah).

Hindsight is 20/20, and hearing reviews from people decades after their experiences helps to gain insight into how the curriculum actually functions as a college and life readiness program.

Perhaps the most alarming aspects of the curriculum is its racism, sexism, and emphasis on parental control. A 1993 article, “Mixed Messages in Black Schools,” in a newspaper out of Connecticut called *The Day*, describes the racist implications of the ACE curriculum’s teachings on Nelson Mandela, which was used in a local Christian school called, Urban Christian Academy. The article was accompanied by a picture depicting a classroom of African American students doing the pledge of allegiance. Below is a screenshot of the workbook content being discussed in the article.

A screenshot of a workbook page with a light gray background. The text is in a black, sans-serif font. It discusses apartheid in South Africa and the role of white businessmen and developers. The text is enclosed in a light gray rectangular box with a thin blue vertical line on the left side.

Although apartheid appears to allow the unfair treatment of blacks, the system has worked well in South Africa. ... Although white businessmen and developers are guilty of some unfair treatment of blacks, they turned South Africa into a modern industrialized nation, which the poor, uneducated blacks couldn't have accomplished in several more decades. If more blacks were suddenly given control of the nation, its economy and business, as Mandela wished, they could have destroyed what they have waited and worked so hard for.

Figure 2: Depiction from ACE Curriculum used in *The Day* publication

The article discussed the racist implications of this text pointing towards the *school's choices* in using the curriculum even though the school publicly denied sharing this viewpoint on Apartheid and was grateful that this text embedded in the workbooks was brought to their attention. It is meaningful to note that the article positioned above this one in *The Day* entitled, “Different Kind of Exchange” described a Christian program fundraising to bring in a “disadvantaged” black student from South Africa who is “deprived of a good education because of the decayed condition of public schools for black South Africans.” The two articles were placed side by side with images of white children in front of a globe accompanying the article praising the exchange program and an image of black children doing the pledge of allegiance accompanying the article about racist curriculum.

Even though the ACE curriculum is only discussed in one of these two articles, the implications of placing the articles side by side demonstrate the culture that on the one hand decries a black school for using racist material, and on the other hand, praises a group of white people “saving” a black student from a supposed inept education. This culture pervades today. The fact that the curriculum was being used by a black school (which has severe and unacknowledged segregationist connotations in itself) softens the curriculum’s racist implications (if a black school would choose it, it must be okay) and vilifies *the school* for selecting it rather than vilifying *the curriculum itself*. Also, demonstrating the efforts of white Christians to bring over a disadvantaged South African black student further implicates the black school in the curriculum choice versus the white Christians who created the curriculum content, and it further shows the efforts of good white Christians which would counteract any potential blame of promoting racist and segregationist ideologies.

The literacy withheld from my participants through access to information reinforced negative and controlling power dynamics as well as the necessity of the performances used to disguise them. As seen in *The Day* publication, these restrictions and performances can disguise racist viewpoints, and in particular, they hide the people and ideologies that create and perpetuate elements such as racism. Loosely, we might be able to venture that being “pretty” and safe was more important than highlighting racism or even correctly teaching important parts of history. Ironically, the protections used to keep evil away worked to disguise and perpetuate true evils, such as racism.

### *Social Conditions*

In addition to information being one element from which Josh and Ben needed to be protected, the social state of learning in a classroom of peers and being taught by a possibly non-Christian adult was also a threat. This threat extended at times beyond school and into being involved in any peer community outside of church and faith-based communities.

Josh was not allowed to engage in *any* social activities outside of the church and homeschool community. In his interview, he mentioned a deep longing to get involved in sports. He daydreamed about the camaraderie and the feeling of understanding who you are in comparison to your peers.

I loved the idea of working with a team and winning together and getting a trophy and maybe even the adoration of some young ladies. Who knows? But my mom didn't allow it because she couldn't control the externalities again, you know? So, I wanted to do lots of things like that...It's an important thing when you're developing you know what is having a skill or having something you do that you get satisfaction from or some sense of identity even. So, music was my thing, but I wanted to play sports, and I didn't have any

avenues there. Otherwise, I would've been kicked out. Pretty severe. Pretty severe consequence for doing something that you want to do.

Josh recognizes the need for a sense of identity developed among peers and through developing a skill alongside others. He knew this experience was withheld from him because it would mean a loss of control when he interacts with others outside the community. With Josh recognizing the connection between social interaction and identity, perhaps his mother also wanted to control where Josh's identity was formed. To have it formed alongside non-believers was a threat. This threat was important enough that his participation in sports would mean he would be kicked out of his home.

Josh's longing to play sports and figure out his identity among his peers reveals he had not internalized the fear of being with others outside the faith as his mother had, but he felt petrified of being in a classroom or learning space with his peers. Much of that he attributed to his inadequate education and feeling very behind, but he also noted that he still carries that fear with him decades later even with his adult achievements.

I had almost a fear, a phobia, of a classroom environment. And even today, it's a little scary because of that deep seeded insecurity of feeling inadequate. To learn...a learning environment almost feels more hostile than supportive. And it is completely not true, but that stuff gets ingrained in you at a very early age. Most kids approached school like it's an opportunity to learn, and me, I had to fight feelings of this is scary because I might get picked out or ridiculed. And this is largely again because of the controlling aspect of fundamentalist Christianity.

Josh longed for the social aspects of being with his peers. He knew the ramifications of the absence of identity forming interactions and an opportunity to understand his skills and talents in

relationship to his peers. At the same time, his lack of education pushed him even farther from his peers, particularly in situations where he might be singled out for his inability to read. His lack of learning became part of his identity, an identity that even now carries a fear in learning situations. It was part of this isolation and his need for peer connection and experiences that eventually pushed him towards leaving the church community when the only option was to get kicked out or stay away from others.

Ben's social conditions were also carefully regulated. As mentioned earlier, he was removed from school when a teacher encouraged imaginary friends, insinuating her lack of understanding about the power of the spiritual realm. His friend groups were also carefully curated, "certain kids in the neighborhood where necessarily their family or their parents smoke or they drank...we weren't allowed to go to their house. They might influence us." At the same time, Ben was allowed to play sports, and he notes this is the primary place during his childhood that gave him a glimpse of how others lived,

So, the kids I played sports with were not home schooled or they were normal kids whose parents were normal parents, so I was exposed to cussing and you know parents...

divorced parents. And I don't know how my parents kind of reconciled all that, but so I wasn't completely out of the loop in some ways. But I remember the guys on my baseball team saying, 'Ben, just say shit. Just say it,' and I'm like, 'No, I'm not going to say it.'

So, you know and that was part of it was I believe a fear of going to hell the other part was fear being in trouble.

Like Josh, Ben was aware that his family was not "normal" in the same way other families were that might "cuss" or be divorced. His peers also recognized his difference, and they tried to get him to participate in their activities...like saying 'shit.' Ben did not say these words because he



was afraid of getting in trouble, but also of going to hell. Even at that young age, Ben recognizes that “normal” people engage in activities that might possibly lead him down a bad path...one that could potentially lead to hell.

Ben’s family valued academic excellence and participation in sports in the same way “normal” families might, but his family offered cautionary tales around bad kids doing poorly in school. He notes, “But all the preconceived notions that have been given to me over growing up was that you know... kids that were bad kids did bad in school.” When he got to high school, he started to notice that his parents’ cautionary tales did not line up with his own observations,

Here I was in this huge high school with like 1600 people and at my last it was like 180, so it was completely different. And I didn't know anybody in any of my classes. I mean it was literally strangers. And that was the only year that was really hard for me. I cried after I would come home crying. I got made fun of. I got you know I just felt very alone and at the same time, the paradigms that I had weren’t working out because the cheerleader in front of me that is super-hot and talking about how drunk she got after the football game Friday night just made a better test grade on her algebra 2 honors test than I did.

These observations about his peers, particularly when tied to his differences leading to bullying and feelings of isolation, began to challenge some of the teachings his parents had enculturated him in, “All of a sudden, I'm realizing that not all bad kids are stupid. It's not working out that way here and it started to make me start questioning.” These questions were intensified in Ben when he engaged in what his parents characterized as something a “bad” kid would do.

Between his junior and senior year, Ben’s parents found out that he had been drinking. He was not caught. Instead, he confessed to his errors in a prayer meeting. His parents removed

him from school his senior year, but Ben protested on the simple grounds that he needed to graduate high school. They let him go back, but they made him sign a contract that he would not drink, have sex, or any akin activities. His parents also refused to be involved in Ben's school life and even the celebrations of his success. He describes,

My relationship with my parents was very strained. My dad flat out refused to come to see me in the talent show because he thought public school had destroyed me and I was a bad person. So, he was like we refuse to come to things like that even though I was like Mr. High School. I was up for Mr. Panther. I was voted the biggest flirt of my senior class. Like, I was kind of popular.

Ben felt that his social success was as important and hard earned as his academic success, "From crying sophomore year to popular senior year, you know? And I've made it a point that I don't care what I'm going to have to do to be popular, happy, fun, but I'm going to do it and that's what I did." In the face of the bullying and insecurity of his sophomore year, he made a choice to overcome his social challenges, and he did. His parents did not feel proud of his hard-earned social accomplishments, and instead, they viewed his public education as having "destroyed" him and made him into a "bad person."

Even though Ben had a good literacy foundation in terms of reading and writing, the same systems that directly impacted Josh's educational experience also manifested in Ben's life. He was socially removed from his peers, and once he was reintroduced and had some typical teenage experiences, he was labeled as bad with education having destroyed him.

## CONCLUSION

When we look at the literacy and educational histories of Josh and Ben, we begin to get a glimpse of the system of thinking that might reside in young Evangelical students when they

work through a discourse of affirmation reliant upon the Bible and their commitments to communal thinking. A strict control of media, educational curriculum, and social learning further entrenches these ways of thinking. As seen in prior chapters with sexuality being governed by a strict control over mind and body with personal, communal, and eternal consequences for misadherence, one can see the dilemma our students reside in when they come into our classrooms. One can see the dilemma the student in the introduction chapter faced when she left her class during the movie, *Her*. When we view these sorts of internal dilemmas as a lack of intellectual rigor, creativity, and capability necessary for critical thinking, we can see the injustice we might be forwarding onto these young people. We can see in the stories of Ben and Josh the long-term enculturation of education being a place of danger and risk. In the case of Josh, learning itself was such a risk that he was not taught to read. In the case of Ben, his parent's strict control over anything he might be curious about alongside their rapid assessment of him as a "bad" kid when he failed, further pushed him deeper into isolation and living two separate lives.

## CHAPTER 6- SHADOW BEAST: WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Gloria Anzaldua in her book *Borderlands* talks about the conflict and tension between home and self. She notes, “Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us” (42). Anzaldua talks about three approaches to the fear of being rejected by your home. One route is to “conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows.” My participants and I tried to hide and control for many years ourselves, our desire, our curiosity, our need for connection, and our doubts. Others try to stay off rejection by making themselves conscious of the “shadow beast,” the desires and voice that resides in us, staring at the beast trying to “discern among its features the under shadow...the reigning order...projects on our beast” (42). In many ways, this project attempts to see what the reigning order has projected onto my participants and my own unacceptable parts - the shadow beasts in us. The third group tries to “waken the shadow beast in us.” She notes that not many can look at its grotesque face. But then says, “But a few of us have been lucky- on the face of the shadow beast we have seen not lust but tenderness; on its face we have uncovered the lie” My participants looked at their shadow beast in all the ugliness they were told it possesses and eventually found tenderness, and in their failure for waking it and looking into its eyes, they uncovered the lies they were told and believed about themselves. They found tenderness for the person that tried and failed to put the unacceptable parts in the shadows and saw the beast they were told was inside them was not horrible and the fear of its ugliness was a lie. It is not ugly. It is not evil. It is not horrible.

My participants eventually embraced and walked through their failure. Their acts of social change took place inside themselves as they faced their shadows. It allowed them to be honest and true to themselves, and with boldly staring at the things they feared the most inside themselves, they uncovered the lies about who they are and what their desires mean. They now view those painful moments as a necessary undoing and a movement towards freedom. They found freedom from an internal struggle of attempting to silence themselves, privately and publicly. They are now free to accept their shadow part, and, in that acceptance, they are free from the system that controlled their perception of themselves.

Change was disorienting and painful for my participants. It wasn't until years later that they were able to see the ways they are freer now. The pain is so dynamic that they do not hold it against their loved ones for not taking the process on. They are at times uncertain they would have unless forced to. Sarah talks about how her friends do not understand how she can be okay with her parents not supporting her lifestyle or even coming to her wedding to a woman someday (although they love her and support her as a person). She notes,

I know how hard it is to walk out of what we were in and where I am now and how painful but like grateful, I am for that journey. But I know why they hang on to their ideals and to the Bible that they believe is like the end all be all of everything because it feels safe to them...questioning things is scary and that would cause them to admit that like the past 50-40 years of their lives have potentially not been what they thought it was. It's hard to like say yes to that kind of a journey and into asking those kinds of questions and I'm just grateful that I was sort of like thrust into it.

Sarah notes that even knowing what she knows now on the other side, she is not certain she could choose to take that journey. She had to be pushed into it. But today, she notes

I'm actually so grateful for that experience. Because it has taken me to where I am now, and I feel so free and so alive. And I feel like I have so much more to say now and I've experienced so many more things. But it's not an easy journey to let yourself go there and ask those questions and let go of everything.

In spite of all that she has learned and experienced, Sarah recognizes that this journey might not be possible for her parents after being believers for 40-50 years. She sees that the cost might be too high for them, and the disorientation of their whole lives being upset is not worth what is on the other side. She does not hold it against them that they operate the way they do or that they might not come to her wedding if she marries a woman. She wants them to be happy.

Maddy likewise allows that her mother might never need to know Maddy was not a virgin on her wedding night. Her mother doesn't need to know that she has been lied to or that the story doesn't always go the way you think it will. Maddy says, "I feel like she needs to be in a safe bubble, so what's the point? I'll allow that for her. She doesn't need her world shaken up." Maddy is not even talking about the broader change that Sarah speaks of. She is simply talking about revealing the truth to her mother about her sexuality. Even that, Maddy believes, will shake her mother's world up.

I say all of this to point out that even though my participants are grateful for their journeys, they do not wish them upon their loved ones. They know the cost. They know the confusion and pain, the disorientation of finding that your world is not what you thought it was. This is how high the cost really is.

The first iteration of this conclusion did not contain my own story. I did not want to talk about what education and leaving my home discourse community and culture had cost me. I imagined people want to hear stories of empowerment and success. Instead, like my participants,

my own leaving resulted in disorientation and pain of a kind that I could never have fathomed as possible. Like my participants, I am not sure I could choose to do this journey again, and I do not wish it upon those I love.

My chair interviewed me with my own interview questions during this project. She observed that underneath many of the significant moments I described was the desire to be seen. I began this dissertation with the intrinsic desire to be seen in mind. And yet, I find that I still am afraid to be seen here in particular ways which on the surface seems to run contrary to my methodology of dialogue and collective meaning making. Unlike my participants though, I am not anonymous. And yet, I hope that somehow as you see my participants and read their stories, you will also see me between the lines. You will know that I and my participants could have been that girl in the First Year Writing class who left during the movie, *Her*. We know what it costs to move into a discourse community that labels observing that movie as a moment of growth versus a moment of leaving and betrayal to a home discourse community. Ultimately, I chose “true acquisition: of another discourse that “required active complicity with values that conflict with one’s home-and community-based Discourses” (Gee 532). I have paid a cost.

I asked each of my participants what they would want to tell a younger version of themselves or another young person coming up after them in similar situations. They talked with compassion about their younger selves. They talked of their children and their nieces and nephews. Each wanted to offer comfort and acceptance. They wished they had listened carefully to themselves and found beauty in their inner world. They wished they had found joy in their bodies and in their thoughts. Every single one talked about trusting and listening to yourself. Sarah said,

I think I would want a younger version of me to just know that she can trust herself and trust her instincts. And just you know, I look back, and I look at pictures of myself, and I was like beautiful, a beautiful little teenager and I didn't know. I would want to tell myself how beautiful I am and that it's ok to just feel beautiful and it's OK to have questions.

Sarah seeks a life of love, connection, and care for others. In her words, you hear her extending that same light to her own self. Josh also spoke of listening to and trusting his own thoughts. He extended,

Well, probably, to thine own self be true. I know that sounds cliché perhaps, but that is one maxim that has been true for me throughout my life. Maybe maxim is not the right word. Be true to yourself. And doubt and criticism come along with that because it's not what everyone else wants. It's not about external approval; it's about internal approval.

Josh has paid a high cost to be able to say these words. He experienced deep criticism and doubt about who he was as a person when he listened to himself and sought to live an authentic and connected life with others.

Ben talked for some time about this topic. He firstly noted, "A couple things: one, find someone outside the circle to talk to and avoid some you know... some scary things. It's okay.

You're not abnormal." Ben offered an explanation for the scary things,

I think for so long there was a chase, a desire within me, to say if I'm going to be gay, I'm going to be that hot gay. Going to go to all the parties. I'm going to do all the drugs. I'm going to, you know, whatever it might be. And part of that was trying to be that person in that community. The other part of me was still escaping.



Ben went on to offer deeper explanations that part of this escape was that he was still running from the shame and self-blame for his being gay. Part of his acknowledging the need to talk to someone outside the “circle” is because as a young person, he hid the fact that he was sexually molested and felt perhaps this caused him to become gay. This led to decades of feeling he lived two different lives and further decades of unraveling the self-blame. Ben needed to listen to himself, but even more importantly in his life, he needed others to listen.

Maddy thinks about her children and describes the way she tries to listen to them and allow them to be authentic. She says to them,

Whatever you need to go through with your journey, I am going to accept you. That is my hugest thing I am pushing on them right now...it is that honesty is salvation. The truth will set you free. And that is what you need to focus your life around, so you don't get trapped into brainwashing yourself into these lies. Then you don't feel good because you are not living in truth.

Before Maddy could accept her own truth, she had to unravel all of the lies she had continually “brainwashed” herself with most of her life. Underneath all of those lies, her truth resided, and uncovering it, although at traumatic cost, has brought her freedom.

Listen to yourself. Speak yourself to others. Love your beautiful self. Critical thinking, as I initially defined it, did not show up for my participants as an engagement with other perspectives outside of themselves as I imagined it would, but instead they experienced coming to terms with the multiple perspectives they carried within *themselves*. They carried their public perspective as an Evangelical, but perhaps the more difficult one to face was the costly perspective that differed from the community they were enculturated in. They were not adopting and exploring another perspective contained in a different body or place; they were adopting

their *own* perspective, the one deep down inside. This did not immediately manifest in a shift in politics or social views - evidence educators might look for. It began in accepting their own desires. It is not looking to understand others, but to understand themselves in a costly way. The struggle was in owning these perspectives and sharing them with others. The second step after listening to themselves was to find others who would see them and listen to them without judgement.

As a writing teacher, I imagined that listening to other people's stories and perspectives might lead to creating stronger critical thinkers and possibly even lead to change as we view other perspectives and experiences. Certainly, as a teacher, I have attempted to do that by allowing students to share their work and fostering careful listening practices. I also imagined that relationships outside home communities, specifically in our classrooms and at universities, would help those stories and differences to have deeper meaning. I thought those same relationships would offer support if students needed to change their relationships to their communities. I also thought certain knowledge around science and the history of religion would cause an acknowledgement of misalignment. My theories were not altogether correct. Instead, I found my participants experienced the following as drivers for perspective shifting and change:

- Failing community standards or realizing they are incapable of living to them and/or will continue to fail. Needing to fail to get out.
- A longing for love and connection.
- A need for authenticity and to be seen by others
- Opening up to doubt and questioning
- Listening to and trusting your own voice

What does this mean for education? We ask students to listen and read deeply. We ask them to adjust to our Discourse. But perhaps we need to ask them to listen to their *own* stories, not the ones they have been taught all their lives or the ones we are now telling them to listen to. Is it even possible to hear others well if we do not hear ourselves first and offer that inner truth to the world? Is it even possible to truly critically think and change without some loss and pain? If so, what does that mean for what we ask of our students? Is true critical thinking darker and harder than we think? Even more difficult for educators and myself to consider: Is it possible that some students ‘perform’ critical thinking knowing what we might want to hear as a result of that exercise?

Through my participants stories bookended between two outward expressions - sexuality and literacy- of internal and systemic control, we can begin to operate with more nuanced thinking (I include myself in this). This control and the way it mapped onto the minds of my participants and myself can be seen in political and social spheres today. Even more importantly, those maps of control can be seen in entrenched racism, sexism, and homophobia that often is associated with Evangelicals and the political party that 81% of them supported in the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Perhaps at the crux of it, like Keith Gilyard, we are more alarmed with the politics Christians represent than their spiritual beliefs. What do we do then with a student who arrives in this entrenched state with all of its resistances to change?

I find myself wondering if we should be asking a version of the question that I asked my participants regarding speaking to their younger selves: What do you want? My creative writing teacher once said that every great character wants something. Possibly, they are great characters because they more accurately reflect the core of people. We all want something. Perhaps, instead of asking what do you think, we should ask instead: what do you want?

We should ask ourselves as educators, particularly those of us teaching writing, what do we want? I know at the heart of teaching grammar, I want students to feel confident when they write, so they will write more. I know at the heart of teaching transitions; I want them to know how their thoughts and ideas tie together. I know at the heart of listening to stories; I want them to be able to “try on different versions of themselves” as bell hooks puts it and find joy. I know at the heart of journals and daily writing, I want them to use words as tools for discovery, inquiry, and understanding. I know at the heart of discovery, inquiry, and understanding, I want them to find more freedom.

I asked my participants what they pray now, and they said they pray prayers of gratitude for the feeling a beautiful day brings or for a meaningful encounter. They pray to be generous, honest, and loving. They pray as an act of recognition for the connections to others in their lives. Some no longer pray, and they are okay with that too.

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