

Living Memory: Nostalgia and Evangelical Girlhood from the Cold War to the Present

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
under the Executive Committee
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2024

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Abstract

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From the beginnings of so-called neo-evangelicalism in the 1940s, white American evangelicals have looked to the past—the biblical past, an idealized past Christian America, the eternal past of childhood—as a model for how to be. This dissertation argues for the centrality of relationality and nostalgia to white American evangelicalism, and furthermore claims that girlhood is an ideal place to see them. Nostalgia is an affective practice, and here it comes out as a bringing back of certain (alleged) practices from the past to teach children to create a better future. Nostalgia thus works as an engine for relationality, binding a community through a shared affective practice, and for the transmission of evangelicalism to its next generation. Through examination of archival materials, social media, and interviews with current evangelical girls, this work traces the ways nostalgia, and in particular a pedagogy of nostalgia, has been employed throughout the recent history of this religious tradition. By portraying how organizations and campaigns like Young Life, the Pioneer Girls, Christian summer camp, and True Love Waits employed nostalgia to educate girls in their care, as well as the nostalgic-pedagogical uses of social media in the present. This work also shows that the meaning of girlhood in evangelicalism has shifted over the decades, from a discrete gendered and aged experience to a preparation period for Christian womanhood to an expansive category incorporating any young woman who has not yet married. Interviews with current evangelical girls shine light on how—or even whether—these shifting meanings have been incorporated into girls’ own identities.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication.....	v
Introduction: Pedagogical Nostalgia and Evangelical Girlhood.....	1
Who Is Evangelical?	2
Evangelical Nostalgia as Affective Practice	9
Relationality in Girlhood and Evangelicalism.....	18
Gender and Evangelicalism	25
Methods and Chapter Outline	26
Chapter 1: Discipline and Wilderness Nostalgia at Evangelical Summer Camp	35
A World Apart	37
A New (Old) Community	47
A Disciplined Wilderness	54
Gender at Camp and in Time	59
Creating Christians.....	63
Chapter 2: Whiteness, Nostalgia, and the Pioneer Girls.....	69
American Pioneers	73
Embodied History as Critical Nostalgia	79
Girlhood/Womanhood	82
Playing the Pioneer Role.....	88
Christians, Heathens, and Temporality.....	98

Chapter 3: Future Nostalgia in True Love Waits.....	106
True Love Waits in Historical Context.....	110
Purity, Temporality, and Christian America.....	118
Nostalgia as Counterculture.....	122
Hardwired to Become a Woman.....	125
Purity as Heterosexual	131
Nostalgia for a Purer Time.....	140
Chapter 4: #Christiangirls and Future Women	151
The Pedagogy of Influencers	152
Nostalgia and Gendered Evangelical Affect.....	159
The Proverbs 31 Woman	165
Expansive Girlhood	171
Nice Christian Girls	174
Relationality and the Gender Binary.....	177
Conclusion: The Past and Future of Evangelical Girlhood	191
Bibliography	201
Primary sources.....	201
Secondary sources.....	213

Acknowledgments

A central pillar of this dissertation is that my young subjects exist primarily in relationship with others. The same could be said for myself and this dissertation. First and foremost, I owe my thanks to my advisor, Courtney Bender, and Gale Kenny, both of whom guided me through many permutations of this project and gave feedback on each chapter as it was written. I am also indebted to Matthew Engelke, who helped me work through ideas and taught me how to communicate them beyond the small field of gender in American religion, and Liz Dolfi, who offered critiques from within it. Courtney, Gale, and Matthew, along with Jodi Eichler-Levine and Susan Ridgely, made an excellent and exceptionally helpful dissertation committee.

Portions of this dissertation were workshopped at Columbia's Religion in America seminar and the IRCPL Dissertation Fellowship Workshop. I give thanks to the members of these groups, who pushed my thinking in new directions and made this dissertation better. The department's administrative staff—Edwin Torres, Katrina Dock, and Eric Meyer—made sure all my paperwork was on time and in order. Thanks also go out to my fellow graduate students in the religion department, especially Kit Hermanson, Connor Martini, Sam Stella, and Emily FitzGerald. You offered solidarity, jokes, and listening ears throughout my experience at Columbia.

This work was supported by Columbia's Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life, as well as the Buswell Library Archives and Special Collections at Wheaton College and the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives. I presented ideas that became parts of this dissertation at the conferences for the American Academy of Religion and the American Society of Church History, and the feedback I got from members there contributed to the final shape of

this project. Thanks to the Interdisciplinary Workshop on Academic Writing for being my writing panopticon. Endless thanks to my cohort in the American Examples program at the University of Alabama—Ryne Beddard, Judith Brunton, Dustin Gavin, Kit Hermanson again, Robyn Lee Horn, Mihee Kim-Kort, and Sarah Riccardi-Swartz—and our fearless leader, Mike Altman. You all built me up as a scholar and I will be forever grateful for having worked with you. I am also deeply grateful to my young interlocutors, who shared with me their joys and problems, and who ably showed that girls are independent religious subjects and should be treated as such.

My final year of graduate school was, for a number of reasons, also the hardest of my life. Thank you to my providers at Mount Sinai Hospital, for keeping me alive to finish this dissertation. Molly, Chris, and Elizabeth went above and beyond what can normally be expected of friends and have become family. Toast and Sesame enforced regular breaks from writing by sitting between me and my computer. Thank you to Bobby for the walks, to Manhattanville Coffee for caffeine, and to my BPC community for the prayers (and food, and baby supplies). Celia, Kendall, and my siblings sent good vibes from afar. Thanks to all my parents, for raising me curious forbidding me from making a purity pledge as a teenager. Thank you most of all to Daniel, who has been with this project since its prehistory as my college thesis and who carried the weight of the entire household to get me to the finish line. Finally, thank you to Isaac, who is too young to read this. You are a goober and a delight.

Dedication

To Dan, who makes me laugh even when I think I can't.

Introduction: Pedagogical Nostalgia and Evangelical Girlhood

A girl is a person situated in time, tasked with performing her gender with an eye to the past, the future, and her own present. “When I was littler, that I didn't really think about like, the meaning of like a girl or like, what does it mean to be a girl?” Gloria, a fifteen-year-old who goes to church outside of Washington, D.C., told me. “And then as I grew older, I kind of like, learned the differences between how the two genders live. Because before I didn't really think anything of it.”¹

This dissertation is about the process Gloria went through: learning to be a girl, and learning to situate oneself in time, relationship, and body, in white American evangelicalism. It is also about nostalgia and its central role in that religious tradition. Explaining what made Christian girls distinctive, Lily, a fourteen-year-old from the same area, said, “I'm thinking about it from a biblical perspective. Like that we're supposed to have gentle spirits, we're supposed to provide and like, give life. But at the same time, be warriors for the Lord.”²

In the absence of Biblical practices designated specifically for girls, Lily looked at ones meant for women, working to learn them now so she would be prepared for womanhood later. Learning nostalgia for imagined biblical times, looking forward to womanhood and backward to childhood, individual relationships with God and with others in their communities—these are all hallmarks of contemporary white evangelical girlhood. But this is just the current moment in a longer history of nostalgia and girlhood in white American evangelicalism dating back to the middle of the 20th century.

¹ Gloria, Interview with Gloria, Zoom, May 2, 2023. All interviewee names have been changed.

² Lily, Interview with Lily, Zoom, May 9, 2023.

Using case studies drawn from the recent history of American evangelicalism, this dissertation explores how American evangelical girlhood and the role of nostalgia within it have changed (and how they haven't) since the emergence of the neo-evangelical movement in the 1940s. I examine archival materials related to the early years of Christian summer camps, showing the ways gender, childhood, and nostalgia for imagined biblical and American wildernesses came together to shape evangelical experience in the modern world. Next, I turn to the archives of the Pioneer Girls during that same period, showing how this evangelical Girl Scouts-like organization employed nostalgia to shape the girls in its care—and how girls were imagined as distinct entities from the women they would one day become. I pick the story up again in the 1990s, with archival materials from *True Love Waits* showing how nostalgia was projected forward as well as backward in girls' lives, and how this phenomenon fit in with a shift to seeing girls primarily as future women. Finally, with a look at contemporary pedagogical materials and interviews with current evangelical girls, I demonstrate how these trends have continued with a push to embody a figure known as the Proverbs 31 woman—and how girlhood has expanded to include young but unmarried women. Through these different case studies, this dissertation demonstrates that nostalgia and gender are at the center of white American evangelical life.

Who Is Evangelical?

Like girlhood, evangelicalism is definitionally complex. There sometimes seem to be as many different meanings of “evangelicalism” as there are scholars who study it, and while the present story starts around the Second World War, a brief discussion of what I will call white American evangelicalism's prehistory, and why I have made the historical decisions I have, is in order. Furthermore, it is impossible to write about white American evangelicalism now without

noting the contentiousness of the very term “evangelical.” In recent years the term has become associated with Christian nationalism, and recent research shows that some who self-identify as evangelical are using the term as a synonym for right-wing, while those who may identify with the kind of evangelicalism explained above shy away from the term itself.³ It has long been the case both that evangelicalism is difficult to define and that many who may be identified with the term instead prefer to just call themselves “Christian,” and political trends seem only to have reinforced these tendencies.

It also remains the case, however, that “Christian” is not a useful analytical term when discussing a particular version of Christianity. (That does not mean its use by people I call evangelical is not interesting: a particular flavor of Christian claiming for their own community the name of the entire religion certainly speaks to the type of Christianity that person sees as valid.) Hence, with reference to the historical context described below, my continued use of the term “evangelical.” This approach came up in every single discussion I had with a church youth group leader as I identified possible girls to interview for this project. Each leader at first seemed surprised that I would identify their church as evangelical, and enough asked what I meant that I soon took to preemptively explaining my rationale. In each case, I explained that by “evangelical” I meant a particular strain of Protestant Christianity focused on emotion and relationships; this I self-deprecatingly contrasted with my own membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which I described as a “frozen chosen” denomination more focused on the analysis and historicity of scripture. While many leaders were confused that a Christian could *not*

³ Ryan Burge, “Think US Evangelicals Are Dying out? Well, Define Evangelicalism ...,” *The Conversation*, accessed July 26, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/think-us-evangelicals-are-dying-out-well-define-evangelicalism-152640>. For an insider view from a high-profile evangelical minister who struggles with but still identifies with the term, see Timothy Keller, “Can Evangelicalism Survive Donald Trump and Roy Moore?,” *The New Yorker*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/can-evangelicalism-survive-donald-trump-and-roy-moore>.

put emotion front and center, all seemed to agree that my definition of evangelical described their congregations, even if it was not a term they themselves used. As Molly Worthen has said of evangelicalism as an analytical term, “We are stuck with it.”⁴

The evangelical story in the United States has commonly been traced to the First and Second Great Awakenings, when emotionality and individualism became hallmarks of several strains of American Protestantism.⁵ This tradition, which continued to develop throughout the nineteenth century, formed the basis of what would come later, and it was not long before looking to the past became a hallmark of the developing evangelicalism.⁶ Already by the nineteenth century, children and youth were playing an important role in this early evangelicalism, and newly established Sunday schools played a major role in shaping the new religious tradition as well as broader white American notions of childhood.⁷

The next major moment frequently cited in the history of American evangelicalism is the modernist-fundamentalist conflict of the early twentieth century.⁸ Building on the emotionality and individualism of early evangelicalism, it is in this conflict that understandings of fundamentalist and soon-to-be evangelical Christians as “Bible-believing” and opposed in some ways to mainline Christians truly took hold.⁹ Some elements of the conflict were squarely theological—namely the fundamentalist antagonism to new readings of the Bible as a

⁴ Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*, 3.

⁵ Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Brown, *The Word in the World*; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*.

⁶ Gutacker, *The Old Faith in a New Nation*.

⁷ Boylan, *Sunday School*; Leal, ““All Our Children May Be Taught of God.””

⁸ Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*; Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*; Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

historicized document open to literary interpretation—but its more practical implications were arguably deeper-seated and more significant for understanding more recent evangelical practice. Between the Civil War and the Scopes Trial, changes across the United States inspired a variety of parallel movements, all of them aimed at seeking meaning by critiquing “secular, bureaucratic systems” in various ways to various ends.¹⁰ For fundamentalist Christians, this meant reaffirming a “common-sense” philosophy that accepted scripture as written, requiring no interpreter between text and layperson reader.¹¹

From here, networks of relationships began to form into what soon became recognizable as a new kind of evangelicalism, branded by leaders such as Billy Graham and Harold Ockenga as neo-evangelicalism.¹² This movement, which is generally agreed to have begun during World War II, emphasized the individual-relationship approach to Jesus and scripture, drawing on the affective emphasis of evangelical prehistory and a renewed focus on evangelism. Though this new evangelicalism has frequently been portrayed as a clean break with a previous reclusive fundamentalism, it is more accurate, as scholars have increasingly noted, to consider it in terms of a reorientation.¹³ While this evangelicalism did make more of a point to engage those outside of the movement and to build relationships within, among, and outside of denominations, it nevertheless maintained the importance of common-sense biblicism, which persists into the present.

¹⁰ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

¹¹ For a fuller history of this approach and how it remains foundational to evangelical practice, see Bielo, *Words upon the Word*; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*.

¹² Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*; Todne Thomas, *Kincraft: The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*; Grant Wacker, “Billy Graham’s America,” *Church History* 78, no. 3 (2009): 489–511.

¹³ For an overview of this historiography, see Matthew Avery Sutton, “New Trends in the Historiography of American Fundamentalism,” *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 235–41.

This approach does not necessarily mean biblical literalism (a term that is more complex than it seems on its face anyway), but rather reading the unmediated Bible as a whole truth that is always relevant to the reader in each of its components. I use “unmediated” here to refer to the relatively low importance of scriptural interpreters to evangelical laypeople, who of course do read Bibles mediated by a translator (though some translations, like the NIV, are more favored in evangelical churches than others).¹⁴ For evangelicals, the way to get at scriptural truth, always provisional to some degree and shifting depending on the circumstances of the reader, is through the cultivation of practices intended to build the believer’s relationships with God, Jesus, the Bible, and fellow believers.¹⁵ This approach to truth seeking by necessity entails an affective component, often described as “feeling Jesus in your heart.” Worthen characterizes this dichotomy between rationality and feeling as a “crisis of authority,” but I propose that these approaches are not dichotomous but complementary, resolved through practices like nostalgia that are intended to illuminate truth through relational affect.¹⁶

I argue that a key driver for teaching and learning how to be and feel evangelical is nostalgia for the early church, for an imagined past, and for the innocence and openness of childhood. This teaching and learning never really ends; as Ann Pellegrini has written, “conversion is never a finished process.”¹⁷ However, for children and adolescents, the pedagogy of nostalgia is intended to be foundational, to set the stage for all the additional Christian learning that will come after. Not just an approach to church-related things, the nostalgias taught to and placed upon children are intended to develop a nostalgic evangelical habitus (to use Pierre

¹⁴ On Bible translations tailored to evangelical sensibilities, see Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*, 198–207. On the persistent relevance of Bible verses for evangelicals, see Bielo, *Words upon the Word*.

¹⁵ Bielo, *Words upon the Word*; Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*.

¹⁶ Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*.

¹⁷ Ann Pellegrini, “‘Signaling through the Flames’: Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 931.

Bourdieu's term), a basic disposition that informs how those children will behave and relate to the world for the rest of their lives.¹⁸

Like many scholars before me, I have restricted my focus here to evangelical groups that are largely white. While valuable and important work has been done recently around Black evangelicalism, in particular Todne Thomas's analysis of relationality in that tradition, mostly-Black churches share a distinct genealogy that is not the Billy Graham-inflected one I look to here.¹⁹ However, unlike others who posit white evangelicalism as a *specifically* white-supremacist movement, I instead turn to Sara Ahmed's analysis of racially inflected spaces to explain the kind of evangelicalism I mean, where the white supremacy is less intentional but ambiently present nonetheless.²⁰

Particularly with the rise of what has been termed Christian nationalism in the United States, scholarship on white evangelicalism has begun to point out that white supremacy.²¹ Unmarked whiteness is key to understanding this strain of evangelicalism—as will be seen in the following chapters. However, I argue that discussing the whiteness in white American evangelicalism with a focus on Christian nationalism neglects more everyday white supremacies

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Thomas, *Kincraft*. Scholarship on Asian American, Latine, and indigenous evangelicals similarly makes an argument for these as more than simply reflections of white evangelicalism. See Antony W. Alumkal, "The Scandal of the 'model Minority' Mind? The Bible and Second-Generation Asian American Evangelicals," *Semeia*, March 22, 2002, 237–51; Ulrike Elisabeth Stockhausen, *The Strangers in Our Midst: American Evangelicals and Immigration from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197515884.001.0001>; Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Misreading America: Scriptures and Difference* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁰ Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness."

²¹ Anthea D. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Sophie Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution: The Politics of White Evangelicalism's Focus on the Family* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2020); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Kerby, *Saving History*; Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, "Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical 'Race Problem': Extending Emerson and Smith's 'Divided by Faith,'" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 341–59.

and leaves out those who have been termed “the other evangelicals”—those who participate in the white evangelical tradition but profess to reject Christian nationalist tendencies and “remain deeply conflicted about how to reconcile political convictions that cut across the liberal-conservative divide.”²² This liberal-conservative divide, and more broadly the common emphasis on the Christian Right in scholarship on evangelicalism, limits who counts as evangelical and leaves out those whose religion does not map neatly onto the United States’ two-party system.

To think more expansively about what white evangelicalism means, I turn to the idea of white spaces. Sara Ahmed argues that whiteness is not a state of being but a habitual mode of taking up space and, further, that “spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that ‘inhabit’ them.”²³ This idea, that a space can be marked as white, even if it is not entirely inhabited by white bodies, echoes ideas such as Du Bois’s double consciousness and Fessenden’s unmarked whiteness while giving them an environmental orientation.²⁴ Considered in this way, white evangelicalism comes across not as a political orientation but as a spatial inheritance—a term that brings to mind the very children this study focuses on. White spaces account for the expansiveness of white evangelicalism, from Graham’s nods to integration up through the experiences of contemporary Asian American girls in churches with white leadership. It also accounts for those evangelicals who have begun to feel discomfort with the term “evangelical” due to its political implications, and yet who still participate in churches influenced by the tradition.

²² Wes Markofski, “The Other Evangelicals,” SSRC The Immanent Frame, January 11, 2018, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/01/11/the-other-evangelicals/>.

²³ Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” 156.

²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 100th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016); Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Evangelical Nostalgia as Affective Practice

Although evangelicalism is known for continually adapting to the present—employing contemporary-style music during church services, spreading via whatever media is popular at any given time—I argue that it is actually a movement driven by nostalgia. This nostalgia takes a number of forms, including nostalgia for the innocence and potential of childhood, nostalgia for some imagined past Christian America, and nostalgia for biblical times. Nostalgia is part of what it means to feel evangelical, and thus teaching nostalgia as both an emotion and a practice is part of how American evangelicals transmit their religion to the next generation.

By “nostalgia,” I do not mean the state of sadly wallowing in a lost past that can never be regained, the kind of nostalgia that was once considered a medical condition. Rather, I mean something closer to what theorist Svetlana Boym meant when she proposed that “nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.”²⁵ Others have proposed different central evangelical affects, in particular Jason Bivins, who centers fear, and Todd Brenneman, who centers sentimentality.²⁶ However, these are not exclusive categories, and both are driven in some way or other by relationships to time: fear by the coming apocalypse, sentimentalism by an idealization of childhood. Thus, while fear and sentimentality are certainly important evangelical affects, both are ultimately undergirded by temporality.

Nostalgia is more explicit in its reference to time than fear or sentimentality and is relatively recent as a central evangelical affect. I date this particular nostalgia to the same postwar era to which I date modern American evangelicalism itself, when movement leaders

²⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

²⁶ Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Todd M. Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel: The Triumph of Sentimentality in Contemporary American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For an insightful study of sentimentalism in evangelicalism's early history, see also Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

began to organize around the restoration of a (theoretical) harmonious former Christian America.²⁷ In contrast to Bivins's religion of fear, a religion of nostalgia also expands the obvious scope of analysis beyond the politically active Christian conservatism of the last forty years. I hope that placing nostalgia at the center of evangelical practice helps to reframe the movement beyond right/left political binaries, allowing for instances that may appear inconsistent with those binaries to still play a key role in religious identity. Furthermore, nostalgia need not only look toward the past, and is arguably more important in its forward-looking capacity. Scholars of heritage have pointed out that practitioners of nostalgia, in looking to the past for a place to return, end up using that past as a template for an idealized future.²⁸ Thinking about nostalgia in this way makes its utility in thinking about childhood obvious, as children have long represented, for adults, both an essential past and a better future.²⁹

I talk about both nostalgic affect and practitioners of nostalgia because nostalgia is an affective practice, both a feeling and a practice. Boym has proposed two categories of nostalgia both marked by this duality: *reflective nostalgia*, which dwells more in the feeling of longing, and *restorative nostalgia*, the practices of collective remembrance to restore the past, often to

²⁷ On Christian America, see Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015). On earlier uses of the past in American Christianity, see Paul J. Gutacker, *The Old Faith in a New Nation: American Protestants and the Christian Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). On exporting the Christian-America ideal beyond the United States, see Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For an in-depth look at why this era is so significant for American evangelicalism, see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*; Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, "'Nostalgia for the Future': Memory, Nostalgia and the Politics of Class," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 7 (August 9, 2017): 612–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1321034>; Ray Cashman, "Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland," *The Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 472 (2006): 137–60.

²⁹ Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children's Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998); Anna Strhan, *The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

nationalist ends.³⁰ Both of these conceptualizations engage both feeling and practice with the difference being one of emphasis and interiority. Boym’s work, however, is on post-Communist Europe, and nostalgia’s two forms in this construction either dwell on or aim to erase the passage of time. For this reason, neither mode is quite right for explaining how nostalgia manifests in American evangelical communities.

Instead, I turn to anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy’s idea of *critical nostalgia*, a more specifically practice-oriented view that describes mining aspects of the past to “offer commentary on the present” and to create a better future.³¹ Like narratives about childhood, critical nostalgia is always future-minded. This kind of nostalgia is not a wish to return to the past wholesale, nor is it an aimless longing for something that can no longer be. Rather, it is the process of bringing elements of the past into the present through practice and material objects, with a goal of restoring to the present those particular aspects of the past for which one is nostalgic. With critical nostalgia, nostalgia as feeling acts as an engine for nostalgia as practice, which allows for transformation over time to account for nostalgia’s ever-shifting reference points. By decoupling individual practices and objects from their larger historical context, critical nostalgia also offers a way to consider nostalgic affect in communities where longing for some particular past may or may not explicitly be evident; even in the absence of some idealized past utopia, longing for utopian *aspects* of the past is nevertheless often present. Critical nostalgia is also useful for considering individual children’s religious formation in a nostalgic environment,

³⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

³¹ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 65. Ray Cashman independently used the same term (the two authors do not seem to have been aware of each other) to describe nostalgic practices that critique the present as a way to give people agency to feel like “willing participants” during rapid cultural change. Due to this distinction, I am employing Dawdy’s usage here. Cashman, “Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland.”

allowing them to identify which elements of the past are important to bring into the present and thereby build their own relationships with time, the Bible, and each other.

Under these circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that Boym claims that children “are not known to be nostalgic.”³² While it is true that children, not having lived for very long, do not have as many opportunities as adults to feel nostalgic for moments in their own pasts, that does not prevent them from engaging in nostalgic practices as participants in what Sara Ahmed has termed an affective economy, by employing an emotion (nostalgia) to align themselves with their community (other evangelicals) and thereby form their own identities.³³ Furthermore, while feelings of nostalgia are difficult to prove when considering the interiority of children, evidence of adults teaching those feelings—and practices—to children is everywhere; I am calling this *pedagogical nostalgia*. Pedagogical nostalgia entails not only the explicit characterization of aspects of the past as better but also the modeling of appropriate nostalgia in order to form the next generation of a particular community. Here I am also indebted to Arlie Hochschild’s work on feeling rules and emotion work. Feeling rules are social norms that govern how members of a community should feel in certain situations, while emotion work is the effort to cultivate appropriate feeling according to those rules.³⁴ For evangelicals, nostalgia for certain aspects of the past is one of those feeling rules, and it is a task of adults to teach it to children in order to pass on evangelical feeling to the next generation and bind together the community.

While nostalgia as it applies to children has largely been understood in the sense Brennenman and Anne Higonnet use it—that is, the child as a figure who is the object of

³² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 34.

³³ Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117.

³⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551–75.

nostalgia—this is only part of the full picture.³⁵ Jodi Eichler-Levine has shown that across American religious traditions, children who represent adults’ own past childhoods have also been taught about collective pasts in order to bring about a “salvific” future—“the future as it is wrapped up in the past.”³⁶ Children are thus from a young age not only made to represent an innocent past themselves but naturalized as “citizens of memory.”³⁷ While children are limited in their power and capacity for self-determination, religious or otherwise, they are not simply vessels ready for the one-to-one reproduction of beliefs and practices foisted onto them by their elders. Rather, such religious reproduction is marked by what Ann Burlein has characterized as vulnerability: while children “are born into a world they do not make and whose power relations shape them without their say,” they also take those influences as tools to “transform the partial, tangled, and contradictory connections they have inherited.”³⁸

Critical nostalgia, though not named as such, appears frequently in studies of evangelicals, as in James Bielo’s project on home churches, Brenneman’s book on sentimental evangelical media, Hilary Kaell’s work with Holy Land pilgrims, and Sara Moslener’s scholarship on the surprisingly long history of purity culture.³⁹ In each case, the practice of nostalgia does not necessarily aim to fully restore an idealized past but instead is projected forward to redeem an uncertain future. In each case also, nostalgia works in an affective

³⁵ Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel*; Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*.

³⁶ Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children*, 2.

³⁷ Eichler-Levine, 13.

³⁸ Ann Burlein, *Lift High the Cross: Where White Supremacy and the Christian Right Converge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.

³⁹ James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel*; Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

economy.⁴⁰ In this function, too, nostalgia’s utility to evangelicals is apparent: a shared nostalgia for childhood, for biblical times, for a certain ever-changing yet agreed-upon past helps bind evangelicals together as a distinctive community in spite of that community’s committed individualization and decentralization. The malleability that marks critical nostalgia also accounts for the hallmark flexibility of evangelicalism. The megachurches derided by contemporary “emerging evangelicals” as all flash and no substance are the same churches founded a generation prior in search of a Christianity truer to their own creators’ senses of early-church authenticity than the organs and pulpits that had come before.⁴¹

Considerations of nostalgia in evangelicalism, or more properly evangelicalism and the idea of time, represent a growing body of research to which the present work contributes. I have already noted the ways Brenneman and Bivins both engage with ideas of affect and time, and why nostalgia is a useful idea for tying fear and sentimentality together as evangelical phenomena.⁴² More recent work by Lauren Kerby more explicitly discusses time and American evangelicalism, describing the ways white American evangelicals tell historical narratives in ways that reflect a particular agreed-upon past Christian America.⁴³ My focus here is different, as I aim to explore not the doing of history but rather the employment and embodiment of certain pasts toward critical-nostalgic ends. Still, these aims overlap, particularly as regards the ways

⁴⁰ Ahmed, “Affective Economies.” On the ways different kinds of memory link “personal recall with collective memory” to create “enduring identity,” see David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139024884>.

⁴¹ Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 256.

⁴² Bivins, *Religion of Fear*; Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel*.

⁴³ Lauren R. Kerby, *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation’s Capital and Redeem a Christian America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020). See also Ruth Braunstein, “The ‘Right’ History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America,” *Religions* 12, no. 2 (February 2021): 95, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020095>.

such history-doing creates in- and outgroups to suit particular narratives, as well as in their engagement of pedagogical uses of the past.

Always lurking within the figure of the child is the idea of the adult they will one day become. Due to this persistent foregrounding of their temporality, children, and girls in particular, are a helpful lens for understanding the broader picture of evangelical nostalgia. Furthermore, even while representing a certain temporality to adults, children are also people in their own right, taking in what they are given by adults and incorporating it into their own experiences. Scholars of children and religion have noted that, rather than accepting and passing on tradition, young religious subjects work their own ritual transformations according to their subjective understandings and needs.⁴⁴ When thinking about transmission of religious traditions, affective practices like nostalgia are therefore more useful than categories like tradition.

Looked at in this light, tradition in fact appears to be a particularly *adult*-oriented way of doing research about and with religious children.⁴⁵ However, reorienting that approach to focus instead on the process of transmitting religious feeling through practice allows room for children's own experiences. Such an orientation toward practice is also helpful in thinking about how religion is transmitted generationally; while children are shaped by their religious traditions, they also do the shaping.⁴⁶ Other scholars have noted that children's religion is particularly

⁴⁴ For an excellent example of children's ritual transformation, see Zohreh Kermani, "Playing with Fire (and Water, Earth, and Air): Ritual Fluency and Improvisation among Contemporary Pagan Children," in *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*, ed. Susan B. Ridgely (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 108–20.

⁴⁵ For a more tradition-oriented approach to religious transmission, see Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ Chris Boyatzis, "Agency, Voice, and Maturity in Children's Religious and Spiritual Development," in *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*, ed. Susan B. Ridgely (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 19–32; Sandra Fox, *The Jews of Summer: Summer Camp and Jewish Culture in Postwar America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023); K. Elise Leal, "All Our Children May Be Taught of God': Sunday Schools and the Roles of Childhood and Youth in Creating Evangelical Benevolence," *Church History*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640718002378>; John O'Brien, *Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

practice-oriented, and that it is often through practice that children come to an understanding of religious meaning.⁴⁷ Rather than investigating tradition as a form of knowledge, then, I am more interested in the practice of nostalgia as a feeling that, for evangelicals, produces a sense of authenticity to the early church and enforces the relational ties that pull together the tradition.⁴⁸ This presents a new understanding of the common evangelical imperative to be “in the world, not of the world”: believers have no choice but to live their mortal lives in the current era—but they should do so with an eye to the (allegedly superior) past.

American evangelicalism is far from the only religion that leans on nostalgia for its identity. Nostalgia, for instance, is a significant force in Judaism (and American Judaism in particular), as established by Eichler-Levine as well as Rachel B. Gross and Sandra Fox.⁴⁹ For American Jews, Gross argues, “nostalgia fulfills individuals’ search for an authentic past, creating communal cohesion through shared religious affect and consumption.”⁵⁰ Unlike the evangelicals that are the focus of this study, these individuals’ search for authenticity in the past is related to Judaism’s status as both a religion in modernity and a people. Still, this understanding of nostalgia’s religious utility, and Gross’s argument elsewhere that engaging in nostalgia is itself a religious practice, is a strong argument for the importance of nostalgia to religious studies more broadly.

⁴⁷ Sally Anderson, “Going through the Motions of Ritual: Exploring the ‘as If’ Quality of Religious Sociality in Faith-Based Schools,” in *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*, ed. Susan B. Ridgely (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 139–56; Kermani, “Playing with Fire (and Water, Earth, and Air)”; Susan B. Ridgely, *When I Was a Child: Children’s Interpretations of First Communion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Strhan, *The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Evangelicalism*.

⁴⁸ For a different look on the search for authenticity in white American evangelicalism, see Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*.

⁴⁹ Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children*; Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479803361>; Fox, *The Jews of Summer*.

⁵⁰ Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue*, 29.

As regards children in particular, Gross notes that “American Jewish children’s materials teach longing for familial and communal pasts that neither children nor adults have experienced.”⁵¹ This again is similar to how nostalgia is employed pedagogically in evangelical communities, although for Gross the past being longed for is often the era of Jewish immigration from Eastern European shtetls to New York City’s Lower East Side. This is a particular past, while the past of evangelical nostalgia is often more historically vague, whether a personal past of innocent childhood or a collective past of biblical times or a nonspecific Christian America. The fact that the collective past being longed for is one not actually experienced, however, remains consistent, and is a phenomenon worth investigating across religious studies.

The collective past that is the object of nostalgia in American evangelicalism is less specific than nostalgia for collective Jewish pasts, but it underlies much of the movement and, indeed, helps bind it together *as* a movement. White American evangelicals’ sense of being an embattled minority is reinforced by the affective practice of reaching back into an allegedly more-Christian past of which they see themselves as a faithful remnant. Although evangelicalism is largely regarded as forward-looking with its engagement of of-the-moment pop-cultural tropes from Christian rock music to Bible apps, it is useful to think about these trappings in terms of return to the early church, which after all took place in its own modern day.⁵² In this case, nostalgia may appear as a longing to return to something from the early church that is perceived

⁵¹ Gross, 116.

⁵² Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Tim Hutchings, “Design and the Digital Bible: Persuasive Technology and Religious Reading,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 205–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2017.1298903>; Jessica Johnson, *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll’s Evangelical Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Eileen Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Katherine Madden, “‘This Is Just an Incredible God Thing’: Monetized Domesticity in Bottom-Up Media,” in *Religion and Reality TV: Faith in Late Capitalism*, ed. Mara Einstein, Diane Winston, and Katherine Madden (London: Routledge, 2018), 49–64, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545950>; Justin G. Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

to be lacking in its current manifestation. Some have described this longing as a search for authenticity, though perhaps it is more accurate to describe it as a *nostalgia* for authenticity.⁵³ Among white American evangelicals, scholars have also noted a nostalgia for some unspecified time in the past when America was a Christian nation—a notion that has not only shaped the history of the religious right, but could also account for white evangelical tendencies toward “colorblindness,” as reaching for a time when shared Christianity mattered above all else allows a pass for not acknowledging differences between marked worldly bodies.⁵⁴

Relationality in Girlhood and Evangelicalism

In their capacity as both past symbols and future actors, children are an obvious site for critical nostalgia, and for its generational transmission. A common thread in the field of childhood studies is how children are situated temporally: children are in some ways forever in the past—whether that be in terms of adults’ personal pasts or in the sense that regardless of the growing up of individual children there will always *be* children—and also represent a (brighter) future.⁵⁵ In the United States, an ideal of protected childhood has predominated, particularly within the white middle class, since the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Children have been an affective site for fear in evangelicalism throughout the period covered in this dissertation, and this fear always

⁵³ Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*. Compare this to Catholics, whose relationship with the early church is more often, though not always, manifested instead in a history of tradition. For more on this comparison, see Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked*.

⁵⁴ Kerby, *Saving History*; Braunstein, “The ‘Right’ History”; Jesse Curtis, *The Myth of Colorblind Christians: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2021). On nostalgia being a term usually reserved for white people, see Geoff Mann, “Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 73–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701538893>; Raymond Orr, “The Nostalgic Native? The Politics and Terms of Heritage and Remembrance in Two Communities,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 7 (August 9, 2017): 643–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1300929>.

⁵⁵ Burlein, *Lift High the Cross*; Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children*; Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Strhan, *The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Evangelicalism*.

⁵⁶ Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

seems to boil down to fear of the future turning out wrong—a situation that can perhaps be rectified by training children to be nostalgic for the right kind of past.⁵⁷ This attitude has roots going back further than the postwar era; romantic notions of (white, middle-to-upper-class) childhood go back at least to the Romantics themselves, and indeed shaped not only art and literature but the very idea of childhood itself.⁵⁸ The nineteenth-century United States saw the rise of Sunday school as an institution to create converts of children, seen as more receptive to proselytizing than adults.⁵⁹

The separate world of childhood as an innocent training ground has been characterized by Kathryn Lofton as existing “so that the child might properly incubate before entering the world as an appropriately domesticated political and economic agent.”⁶⁰ Importantly, the figure of the child also magnifies fear born of a desire to protect a certain way of life beyond the period of childhood. Ann Burlein notes this, and points out that one result of children’s being “affective magnets” is that they are trained in familiarity in order to perpetuate the way of life in which they are raised.⁶¹ While her analysis focuses specifically on the Christian Right, this is clearly not a phenomenon restricted to one contemporary political movement and can be usefully considered as part of the broader story of American childhood, particularly its white, middle-class iterations. Protected childhood emphasizes the innocence of children; as such, the protected childhood ideal

⁵⁷ Bivins, *Religion of Fear*; Gillian Frank, “‘The Civil Rights of Parents’: Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant’s Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (2013): 126–60; Carol Mason, “Reproducing the Souls of White Folk,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 2 (2007): 98–121; Strhan, *The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Evangelicalism*.

⁵⁸ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*.

⁵⁹ Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁶⁰ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 142.

⁶¹ “Children act as affective magnets, attracting fears about sexuality and gender, race, class, and nationhood in ways that move people into the Right’s orbit without requiring them actually to agree with its philosophical, doctrinal, or political positions.” Burlein, *Lift High the Cross*.

places innocence itself in the past as a distinct characteristic of children, especially of girls, and yet a characteristic worth bringing into the future.

The generic figure of the child has historically been implicitly gendered male, both in research on children and in places like Sunday school texts.⁶² But children are also gendered; the present work is in part an effort to understand what that gendering looks like in a particular population. That is not to say that children are simply pre-men and pre-women. Rather, the gender of children can also be understood in a category of its own, marked as both the beginning of learned gender performance and as a separate category.⁶³ As Driscoll has noted, “To be named/recognized as a girl implies a range of approved and valued behaviors differentiated from women, boys, or children.”⁶⁴ Children, as gendered by the adults in their lives under the auspices of protected childhood, do not bear the same responsibilities as adults, nor do they have the same bodies and experiences. These different embodiments, inflected by the actual individuals who inhabit them, mean that though in some senses one leads into the other, boys and girls are different from men and women.

But that does not mean that gender is unimportant before adulthood. Rather, as Driscoll has noted, “before puberty the gender of a body is held to be an inadequate and perhaps unstable

⁶² Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture & Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris, “Introduction,” in *The Girls’ History and Culture Reader: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1–14; Valerie Hey, *The Company She Keeps: An Ethnography of Girls’ Friendships* (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1997); Mary Celeste Kearney, “Coalescing: The Development of Girls’ Studies,” *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 1 (2009): 1–28; Emily A. Murphy, *Growing up with America: Youth, Myth, and National Identity, 1945 to Present* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2020); Anne Phillips, *The Faith of Girls: Children’s Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Diana Lee Beach, “Sex Role Stereotyping in Church School Curricula” (John Knox Press, 1972), AR 138-2, box 36, folder 20, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

⁶³ For the former, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999). For the latter, see Mary Bray Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Putnam, 1994).

⁶⁴ Driscoll, *Girls*, 118.

map of the body.”⁶⁵ Through this lens, it is puberty that both transforms a girl into a woman and renders her legible as a girl in the first place.⁶⁶ This gets at two ideas I want to dig into here: girlhood as a process on the way to womanhood, and girlhood as an ideal imposed by adults, both of which are specifically situated in time. The figure of the girl offers an opportunity to theorize a better future—and for adult women to “affirm their own sense of themselves as adult and in control of their own identities” in contrast to the in-process girl.⁶⁷ The person of the girl develops her identity through or sometimes in opposition to the theoretical girl.⁶⁸ Within white American evangelicalism, the idea of childhood gender as a distinct category of identity, prominent from the 1940s through the 1970s or so, gradually gave way to the idea that childhood gender is merely a preparatory phase on the way to adult gender, a phenomenon explored within this dissertation.

Within the field of girlhood studies, there has been a historical tendency to take white, middle-class girls as the default.⁶⁹ Though, as with the white-boy problem in childhood studies, this has changed in recent years, the unmarked white-middle-class-ness of the “universal” girl remains something to be considered. Although the present research primarily focuses on girls in these very categories, I hope that by explicitly discussing the race and class positionalities of the

⁶⁵ Driscoll, 87.

⁶⁶ For more on the cultural legibility of puberty and femininity, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, First Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). For more on girlhood as process, see Gerry Bloustien, *Girl Making: A Cross-Cultural Ethnography on the Processes of Growing up Female* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003).

⁶⁷ Marnina Gonick, *Between Femininities: Ambivalence, Identity, and the Education of Girls* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 5.

⁶⁸ Gonick, *Between Femininities*; Driscoll, *Girls*; Rebecca C. Hains, *Growing up with Girl Power: Girlhood on Screen and in Everyday Life* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012); Harris, *Future Girl*.

⁶⁹ Hains, *Growing up with Girl Power*; LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Jane Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin, “Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls’ Studies,” in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15–27.

subjects I describe and thinking about white American evangelicalism as an Ahmedian “white space,” these unmarked categories become marked and thereby more complex.⁷⁰

Another note on complexity: I use “boys” and “girls” here, as I do throughout, with the understanding that gender is, of course, far more complicated than that. I employ these binary categories as a consequence of my interlocutors doing the same. Throughout the history I discuss here, and in conversations with present-day girls, white American evangelicals present gender as an absolute, self-evident binary, though enthusiasm for and emphasis on the fact of that binary varies. Part of the project here is understanding evangelical pedagogies of nostalgia, and part of that pedagogy is assigning supposedly traditional gender roles to children and teaching them to behave accordingly. Such a model, though it is expansive in terms of what a boy or girl is capable of, leaves no room for those outside of those categories.

Historically, white American girls have represented a particular temporal positionality that renders their role in evangelical nostalgia especially sharp. On one hand, girls are supposed to be more moral and more innocent than boys. On the other, at least until they become women, they are also alleged to be more mentally and emotionally mature.⁷¹ Girls thereby sit at the nexus between idealized past and ideal future and possess a unique capacity for getting there. This is also the attitude behind what has been called “the girl effect,” the idea that the best way to lift up communities, especially economically marginalized ones, is to invest in the adolescent girls within them.⁷² In white American evangelicalism, this unique temporal positioning of girls is

⁷⁰ Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (August 1, 2007): 149–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>.

⁷¹ This binary characterization is especially stark in the purity-culture materials examined in chapter 3.

⁷² Karen Brown, “Global Girl Policy and the Girl Effect: Gendered Origins and Silences,” electronic resource, in *Children and Youth as Subjects, Objects, Agents: Innovative Approaches to Research Across Space and Time*, ed. Deborah Levison, Mary Jo Maynes, and Frances Vavrus (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 175–89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63632-6>; Harris, *Future Girl*.

also influenced by an emphasis on relationality that is significant within both evangelicalism and girlhood as a category of analysis, practice, and lived experience.

Additionally, scholars of both girlhood and evangelicalism have independently noted relationality as a category of critical analysis that is important to their fields, but the resonance has not yet been noted in either scholarship as shared. In her work on girls' friendships, Valerie Hey proposes that relationship roles—particularly as daughters, girlfriends, and friends—are the sites where girls work out their shifting identities. Girls here are “located in economies of friendships as sites of power *and* powerlessness.”⁷³ Marina Gonick, too, in her work on the figures of the “normal” versus the “problem” girl, argues that for the empirical girls developing their identities based on these two figures, femininity is itself “an expression of certain kinds of relationality.”⁷⁴ My work connects these strands, discussing girlhood as not only experientially relational but also ontologically relational—something it has in common with modern American evangelicalism.

As Sally K. Gallagher has argued and others have observed, evangelical Christianity is, “at its heart, is about relationships rather than rules.”⁷⁵ An organizing theology might be summarized as a belief in the importance of ongoing relationships as a keystone of individual religious practice. The evangelical association between faith and action, epitomized in the act of witnessing with an aim to convert, also plays a key role in building both real and imagined

⁷³ Hey, *The Company She Keeps*, 19.

⁷⁴ Gonick, *Between Femininities*, 13.

⁷⁵ Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 78. See also James S. Bielo, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Omri Elisha, “Personhood: Sin, Sociality, and the Unbuffered Self in US Evangelicalism,” in *The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism*, ed. Simon Coleman (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 41–56; Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012); Daniel Silliman, “An Evangelical Is Anyone Who Likes Billy Graham: Defining Evangelicalism with Carl Henry and Networks of Trust,” *Church History*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072100216X>.

communities, resulting in a relational angle that functions in evangelicalism in a way that is different from other Christian groups.⁷⁶ Beyond relationships with family, community, and potential converts, evangelicals are expected to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (crucial for a “born-again” experience), with God, and with the Bible. These theological relationships, in particular, highlight the degree of individual discernment and interpretation available to evangelicals within a certain framework centering Biblical truth—even for children still building said relationships, who after all frequently seek baptism well before high school. It is therefore imperative for evangelical adults to encourage children in their care to form their own religious identities, as only they as individuals can build their own theological relationships. Adults may teach children techniques for building those relationships, but the very individuality of evangelical belief leaves it especially open to shifts in practice and priorities, if not in core theology, from one generation to the next.⁷⁷

On top of all this, as I have already noted, scholars of childhood and religion note that children’s religious practice, regardless of their religion, is largely practical and relational. By bringing all these forms of relationality together and relating them to nostalgia, this project not only allows them to illuminate each other in a way that pushes girlhood studies forward but also demonstrates why girlhood is an important site for understanding white American evangelicalism.

⁷⁶ For the classic description of the evangelical relationship between faith and action, see David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989). For a relationality-based critique of Bebbington’s model, see Silliman, “An Evangelical Is Anyone Who Likes Billy Graham.”

⁷⁷ For analyses of the dynamic between evangelical individualism and relationality, see Elisha, “Personhood”; Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*; Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*.

Gender and Evangelicalism

As the following chapters will show, evangelicals have been doing something like girl power since Billy Graham's heyday. Jessica K. Taft's definition of girl power is useful here: it primarily consists of "girl-positive feelings" that encourage girls "to think about girlhood in these purely cultural ways, rather than as a space for social and political action."⁷⁸ Though Taft understandably takes issue with this dynamic as a kind of defanged feminism, its resonances with evangelical relational theology, which is based largely on individual experience, are clear. In Taft's understanding of girl power, girlhood is a site of self-improvement toward a more authentic femininity (whatever that means to the practitioner), much as white American evangelicalism is frequently characterized as an authenticity-directed self-help project.⁷⁹ Girl power, in short, is one way of talking about neoliberal ways of doing girlhood, and one that is particularly useful here.⁸⁰

In the body of work on gender and evangelicalism, scholars have often highlighted the tradition's emphasis on gender complementarianism and in particular submissiveness as a desirable quality for women.⁸¹ However, these same scholars have also long emphasized that this submissive complementarianism is almost never as simple as it sounds and, though restrictive,

⁷⁸ Jessica K. Taft, "Girl Power Politics: Pop-Culture Barriers and Organizational Resistance," in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 72, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203492567>.

⁷⁹ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel*; Johnson, *Biblical Porn*; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*; Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions*. For the longer history of American therapeutic religion, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Christopher G. White, *Unsettled Minds: Psychology and the American Search for Spiritual Assurance, 1830-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁸⁰ Bloustien, *Girl Making*; Harris, *Future Girl*; Melanie Kennedy, *Tweenhood: Femininity and Celebrity in Tween Popular Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2019).

⁸¹ Kate Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*; R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Lisa Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings: How Evangelicals Do Gender and Practice Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023).

still offers women opportunities to exercise power and independence even in the most conservative communities. I am extending this line of thinking to argue that this complex understanding of gender roles is even more the case for girls because even as they are preparing for the future, girls are gendered differently from adult women. This makes them a site of nostalgia for the women they will become as well as a site of potential for the future of Christianity.

Even as scholarship on white American evangelical gender practices helps illuminate what is going on with girls in the tradition, that scholarship very rarely discusses girls explicitly. Women here are frequently treated as fully formed, with little if any discussion of how they got there. Where children are discussed in research on evangelicalism, they are largely ungendered, which, as I have already pointed out, is a tendency that tends to render girlhood as a bonus quality to be stacked on top of the category of child, rather than a category of analysis in its own right.⁸² By combining gender and age as categories of analysis within research on white American evangelicalism, I hope to illuminate new ways of thinking about how it works.

Methods and Chapter Outline

In order to explore the relationship between nostalgia and evangelical girlhood, I have employed a mixed methodology. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 rely on archival and published primary sources, while chapter 4 additionally incorporates social media and interviews with girls themselves. This allows me not only to closely examine evangelical nostalgia as it is projected upon and taught to girls within the movement, but also to trace the history of that nostalgia and how it has changed over time—and, more to the point, how it has *not* changed. I have not set out

⁸² For insightful works on children in evangelicalism that nevertheless neglect gender in this way, see Vern L. Bengtson, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Burlein, *Lift High the Cross*; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*; Strhan, *The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Evangelicalism*.

to create a traditional history. Rather, each chapter looks at different material in a particular time period as a case study for the ways evangelical girlhood worked in relationship with nostalgia at different times over the recent history of white American evangelicalism.

Each historical chapter focuses on a different parachurch organization (or, in one case, a pair of them), from 1939 through the early 2000s: chapter 1 draws on archives about Christian summer camps, specifically those run by Young Life and the Pioneer Girls from the 1950s through the 1970s; chapter 2 turns more fully to the archives of the Pioneer Girls covering the same period; and chapter 3 examines the archives of True Love Waits, primarily from 1993 through 2013. Although evangelicalism is by its nature decentralized, parachurch groups—ministries that work across churches and denominations—are a major part of what ties the movement together.⁸³ This type of ministry boomed in the Cold War era that I use to mark the beginning of modern American evangelicalism, and within this boom were a great many groups aimed at children and teenagers, creating a large evangelical youth movement from what would otherwise have been a vast but loose collection of individual churches.⁸⁴ It is with this in mind that my first three chapters look at how Christian girlhood was portrayed and perpetuated by particular organizations, and how it was transmitted through a pedagogy of nostalgia. Documents explored in these chapters include letters from girls, handbooks written for girl audiences, administrative materials from behind the scenes of each organization, and more such documents that give clues to how evangelical girlhood was constructed from the top down and, to some degree, how that construction impacted girl participants. These materials came primarily from

⁸³ Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*.

⁸⁴ Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*; McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*.

two archives: the Buswell Library Archives and Special Collections at Wheaton College, and the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

A limitation of any archive is, of course, its curation. Scholars of childhood have long lamented the difficulty of finding children’s voices in archives assembled by adults, and that remains the case here.⁸⁵ Further, those who do appear in archives often adhere to assumptions about the right kind of child—often a white, middle-class one—to save for posterity. This tendency is concomitant with the tendency to mark white, middle-class girlhood as default and others as deviant, perhaps because nonwhite, non-middle-class girls are perceived by hegemonic authorities as older than their years, or are not considered in the same category at all.⁸⁶ Consequentially, the archival portions of this research largely focus on the nostalgias adults within these organizations projected upon and taught to the girls in their care. While evidence for historical girls’ own lived experience is limited, what *is* discoverable is what kind of girl they were taught to be.

Whereas the voices of girls have to be found between the archival lines in the historical chapters of this work, for chapter 4 I shift methodologies. While I still look at publications and especially social media posts from churches, Christian influencers, and girl-focused organizations, I also interviewed girls active in evangelical youth groups, ranging in age from

⁸⁵ See Fox, *The Jews of Summer*; Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, “Hidden in Plain View: The History of Children (and Childhood) in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 43-49, 158; Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*, Second edition (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018); Moira Hinderer, “Childhood in the Land of Hope: Black Children and Religion in Chicago, 1920-1945,” in *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*, ed. Susan B. Ridgely (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 220–35; Leslie Paris, *Children’s Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Simmons, *Crescent City Girls*.

⁸⁶ Simmons, *Crescent City Girls*. See also Ward and Benjamin, “Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls’ Studies”; Holly N. S. White and Julia M. Gossard, “Considering ‘Double Age’ in the History of American Childhood and Youth: An Introduction,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 15, no. 3 (2022): 355–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2022.0034>.

eleven to fifteen. To determine churches to reach out to, I began with the Hartford Institute for Religion Research's Database of Megachurches in the U.S.⁸⁷ Although not all evangelical churches are mega—far from it—this database was a good place to start, particularly as it includes churches in every state sorted by denomination. I was then able to narrow down my list to locations where I had connections, in large part so I could give a reason for my interest in a church beyond having found them on a website, and also to increase the likelihood that I would be able to meet with my interlocutors in person one day. I restricted my search to denominations, or nondenominational churches, that tended toward the theologies and practices I have identified as particularly evangelical. From there, I examined faith statements for indications that each church promoted things like individual conversion and a personal relationship with Jesus, family-ministry pages to see if the church had a dedicated youth group, and general websites for evidence that the church presented itself as largely white or (aspirationally?) multicultural. Although there are large evangelical churches that are primarily Black or Asian, in particular, they are outside the scope of a dissertation about white-spaces evangelicalism.

From there, I e-mailed youth ministers and lead ministers of sixty-one churches, introducing myself and my research and asking for assistance. Although many e-mails went unanswered, I ended up meeting with a number of youth pastors over Zoom, where we discussed my research goals and, every time, my own religious background. Once I'd been vetted, these pastors gave me contact information for the parents of girls in their groups who were in the right age range; sometimes they also recommended more area churches to reach out to. Here, I ran into a similar flaw to that presented by the archives: though I would be talking to participants myself this time, they were still selected by religious authorities as good representatives of their

⁸⁷ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "Database of Megachurches in the US," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed February 29, 2024, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>.

church. On occasion they would apologize to me for things like trying but not succeeding to read the Bible every day, seemingly feeling guilty for not being a good representative. Still, the girls were forthcoming about their experiences and reassured that nothing they said would be reported to their parents or church leaders or connected to them in print. I had extended conversations with seven girls.⁸⁸ We discussed their experiences in youth group, how youth group was different from children's Sunday school, and what it meant to be a girl, to be a Christian, and to be a Christian girl. They shared where their experiences dovetailed with and differed from the expectations they understood authority figures to have for them and showed a notable openness to self-reflection.

In addition to interviews, I explored contemporary evangelical girlhood through a variety of pedagogical sources. Two recent purity guides from Lifeway are forthright in their pedagogical aims, teaching readers what purity should look like in the 2010s and 2020s. Here I trace shifts from earlier purity guides and explore how the girlhood presented in them is and is not in line with a shift to pre-womanhood that came along with conservative Christianity's increased emphasis on gender differentiation in the 1980s and 1990s. Additionally, I turn to a variety of TikTok and YouTube videos aimed at past and current evangelical girls. The videos also serve pedagogical purposes, though the teaching moments here are less explicit as creators instead present normative portraits of good Christian girlhood, with the pedagogy more implied. I focused on YouTube and TikTok, two websites with large tween-and-teen-girl viewership.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ This is an area for further work as I transform this project into a book manuscript. I would like to eventually have these conversations with around 30 girls.

⁸⁹ Monica Anderson, Michelle Faverio, and Jeffrey Gottfried, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023," *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech* (blog), December 11, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/>.

Like archival research, researching girlhood through social media presents limitations. The early-adolescent girls in whom I am most interested are less likely to use their YouTube accounts for anything but commenting and are also those most likely to have their TikTok accounts set to private. Though I could have seen videos from the private TikTok accounts by following them, I did not do so out of respect for these privacy settings and so limited my pool of videos from evangelical girls to those with public-facing profiles. These are (understandably) more likely to be run by girls and women from later adolescence through their early twenties, though the young women's frequent self-description in terms of girlhood is something that I explore.

Although the girls both archival and current in this study range in age from around six to around eighteen years old, I am especially interested in girls between ages ten and fourteen—girls who not only are transitioning into adolescence and the period between one form of femininity and another, but also are beginning to be treated as capable religious subjects within their own churches. Although numbers are difficult to find, evangelical organizations are committed to the idea of the “4-14 window,” the ages at which children are most receptive to Christ. A survey from the National Association of Evangelicals in 2015 allegedly reported that 63 percent of its membership became Christians during this period in life. Though the survey is no longer online, suggesting dubious veracity, the idea is influential and still shapes how evangelical leadership thinks about their youngest affiliates; the 63 percent statistic is still frequently cited by other evangelical organizations.⁹⁰ The latter end of the 4-14 window, around middle school, is the period that Sunday school and Bible study begin to be segregated by gender

⁹⁰ Steve S. Chang, “Don’t Neglect the 4–14 Window of Children’s Ministry,” The Gospel Coalition, March 6, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/want-missional-dont-neglect-4-14-window-childrens-ministry/>; Andrew York, “The 4-14 Window,” Child Evangelism Fellowship, May 10, 2021, <https://www.cefonline.com/articles/teach-kids-articles/the-4-14-window/>.

at least some of the time. This reflects broader American representations of puberty as a period of gendering (though this is again not to say femininity does not exist before adolescence). It also reflects prevailing attitudes of precarity: adolescents, and in particular teenage girls, have long been represented in American culture as morally and spiritually at risk, and as a population in need of saving.⁹¹

Chapter 1 introduces three major modes of evangelical nostalgia with a look at midcentury evangelical summer camps. Here I discuss nostalgias for biblical times, an idealized past Christian America, and the innocence of childhood as taught at summer camps run by the Young Life and Pioneer Girls parachurch organizations from the 1950s through the 1970s. At camp, these nostalgias frequently focused on the idea of wilderness, bringing to mind both biblical wilderness narratives and white American Manifest Destiny. I also introduce the idea of girlhood as a gendered experience distinct from womanhood, during which girls gradually learned to be future women but also practiced characteristics distinct to the category of girl. This approach to girlhood would be the dominant one for modern white evangelicalism's first several decades.

Chapter 2 looks more closely at Pioneer Girls, an organization that worked as something like an evangelical alternative to the Girl Scouts, also from the 1950s through the 1970s. As a single-gender parachurch organization, Pioneer Girls pulls into focus evangelical ideas about what girlhood meant during this period—and one thing it meant was nostalgia, with the figure of the girl always being a past figure, looking to a past time for guidance. The figure of the pioneer had characteristics girls were encouraged to emulate, from outdoorsiness to strong Christian

⁹¹ Gonick, *Between Femininities*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Sarah Pike, "Religion and Youth in American Culture," in *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*, ed. Susan B. Ridgely (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 33–49.

community. The chapter also highlights one nostalgia important to white American evangelicalism: the period of westward expansion, which was foundational to the organization's critical-nostalgic aim to create a renewed Christian America. Significantly, this Christian America was a white space, which the Pioneer Girls also encouraged with pedagogical materials that portrayed participants as normatively white.

Chapter 3 examines a less specific kind of nostalgia that pervaded evangelical activities in the 1990s and early 2000s through materials related to True Love Waits. Unlike the phenomena examined in the previous two chapters, True Love Waits was much more explicitly future-focused. Accordingly, rather than highlighting nostalgia for a vague but nevertheless specific past, the work of True Love Waits promoted instead the converse: the idea that modern American culture allowed for too much sexual license, which led to all manner of moral downfall for the nation. The past here provided a productive contrast largely by implication. Temporality nevertheless played a large role in how girls were taught to be evangelical, with purity pledges and all that accompanied them being presented as a traditionalist yet desirable critical-nostalgic counterculture. Here, too, is seen a continuation of the personal nostalgias from the previous chapter with a time-traveling twist. As in the work of the Pioneer Girls, nostalgia for girlhood itself makes an appearance within True Love Waits materials, as do prompts to adult leaders to be nostalgic for their own pasts. But these materials also taught personal nostalgia to students themselves, encouraging them to imagine their future selves thinking back on the purity-led choices made by their present selves and feel gratitude.

Chapter 4 turns to the present day, looking to pedagogical materials including purity guides, online influencer videos, and interviews to see where evangelical girlhood stands now. As it turns out, girlhood has become expansive, including young women up until they are

married, while remaining characterized as eternally in the past. Despite this expansiveness, however, girls themselves do not seem to think about their gender very often, though as they get older it becomes more and more relevant. This chapter looks specifically at the idea of biblical womanhood and the phenomenon of the Proverbs 31 woman. A corresponding biblical girlhood does not seem to exist, part of the continued characterization of girlhood as a period of preparation and passing-through that became apparent with the purity movement. Girlhood also remains relational, formed among girls themselves and in their relationships with their peers, their authority figures, and God. As a result, white evangelical girlhood continues to be passed—and slightly transformed—from one generation to the next.

Chapter 1: Discipline and Wilderness Nostalgia at Evangelical Summer Camp

Jacky Everett, a teenager in Richmond, Virginia, knew exactly when she first became “serious about Christ”: November 1972, when she attended a weekend retreat at her local Young Life camp. She spent the subsequent eight months “reading and learning about God” before going to a week-long summer camp with the same organization in the summer of 1973. In a letter to Tom Raley, one of Young Life’s regional directors, she wrote, “The knowledge and understanding that I discovered about my relationship with God last week far surpasses what I had learned in those eight months.”⁹² For Everett, summer camp had succeeded in its mission: to create Christian youth by isolating them in a nostalgic, all-Christian environment.

The mid-twentieth century United States saw an explosion of youth-centric evangelical programming, including the rise of the Christian summer camp. These programs treated children and especially teenagers as a population unto themselves, with their own needs and desires—and with the unique potential to carry the new American evangelical movement into its next era.⁹³ To do this, they employed the nostalgia that already suffuses evangelicalism to create an envisioned better future. Evangelical summer camps harnessed all of these into a critical nostalgia aimed at forming the next generation of American Christianity, critiquing the present by bringing certain alleged past practices—in this case, the formation of all-Christian environments—in order to create a more godly future.

Summer camp also provides a lens on the use of nostalgia in the gendering of childhood and adolescence within American evangelicalism in the postwar era. Summer camps both secular

⁹² Jacky Everett to Tom Raley, “Letter from Jacky Everett to Tom Raley,” August 4, 1973, Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

⁹³ Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*.

and religious were an outgrowth of the late-nineteenth-century recreation movement. The various permutations of the recreation movement equated good health with good morals, and camp provided an opportunity to teach these morals to the youth of America. Summer camp has often been characterized as a place where girls could cast off their typical gender roles in favor of a general-purpose ungendered outdoorsiness.⁹⁴ However, they also did, in their way, promote traditional gender roles in terms of recreation and specific chore-related activities.⁹⁵

One of the recreation movement's manifestations came to be known as muscular Christianity, which linked a strong body with a strong faith and led to the creation of institutions like the YMCA but posed problems for women who wished to participate, as muscular Christianity was primarily a movement of men.⁹⁶ These women argued that the adoption of characteristics frequently coded masculine did not necessarily entail masculinization, and they advocated for an alternative muscular Christianity without the masculine overtones, forming girls' outdoor organizations to teach the same by the early twentieth century.⁹⁷ Evangelical girls attending Christian summer camp by midcentury, then, did not take a break from their role as girls so much as continue to learn how to perform that role in a nostalgia-suffused pedagogical environment.

Christian summer camp in the mid-twentieth century employed nostalgia, and critical nostalgia in particular, focused around two different versions of the past: the Christian biblical tradition of the wilderness, and the evangelical narrative of some past Christian America. As

⁹⁴ Leslie Paris, "The Adventures of Peanut and Bo: Summer Camps and Early Twentieth-Century American Girlhood," in *The Girls' History and Culture Reader: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 84–108.

⁹⁵ Abigail Ayres Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁹⁶ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁹⁷ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*.

wilderness fantasy, camp provided an opportunity to enact stories about Christian struggle and redemption in a controlled environment. Meanwhile, it also provided an all-Christian environment by reviving an idealized past to create a model of evangelized Christian community for campers to bring back into the “real world.” Further, in doing so, these camps constructed for campers the idea of “the world” itself, defined against the idealized summer-camp environment. Although the phrase “in the world, but not of the world” had not yet become iconic evangelical shorthand, summer camps in this period exemplified the aphorism.

This is not the first place that references to the outdoors and to Christian America have converged in evangelical practice. Christian summer camps, especially in the mid-twentieth century, threw back to referents including camp meetings and tent revivals. They also enacted, and trained campers to enact, a version of Manifest Destiny, bringing Christianity into (a fantasy of) untamed nature in order to then bring it to a fallen world. Using materials from Young Life and Pioneer Girls summer camps during the postwar era, this chapter explores how evangelical summer camps employed these heritages to form the next generation of the movement.

A World Apart

Scholars of summer camp tend to characterize camp in two ways: as a site of nostalgia for some kind of pure humanity long past, and as a blank slate on which to build a new and better way of life.⁹⁸ Evangelical summer camps took a little of both, envisioning a week at camp as a kind of Eden—the innocent, pure blank slate at the beginning of the evangelical historical

⁹⁸ For the former, see Fox, *The Jews of Summer*; Paris, “Adventures of Peanut and Bo.” For the latter, see Mandi Baker, *Becoming and Being a Camp Counsellor: Discourse, Power Relations and Emotions* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Björn Lundberg, “Localized Internationalism: Camping Across Borders in the Early Swedish Boy Scout Movement,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 15, no. 1 (2022): 75–92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2022.0004>.

imaginary, elements of which could then be brought back into campers' normal lives once they were properly taught through a pedagogy of nostalgia.

For this research, I examined materials from two large evangelical youth organizations, Pioneer Girls and Young Life, which both ran networks of summer camps (and still do today). The bulk of these materials were written by adults: staff training materials, guides for counselors, and promotional pamphlets advertising the results of camp to patrons or the excitement of camp to children and teenagers, although I do use materials written by campers themselves, like Jacky Everett, where I can. This research thus focuses primarily on the goals and pedagogy of evangelical summer camp, rather than its lived experience. Even the children who do appear in the archive are largely mediated: their letters were considered exemplary or otherwise important enough for adult recipients to keep, or to publish in a newsletter. This mediation further speaks to the ultimate goals of camp by raising the question of why these particular child-authored materials survive, and what purpose they may have served.

I primarily look at these camps from the 1950s through 1970s, when the evangelical summer camp movement was in full swing, although both organizations opened their first summer camps in the mid-1940s and the archives I examine contain materials through the early 1980s. In addition to marking one high point of evangelical youth culture, this period also covers the three middle decades of the Cold War, as well as social justice movements in the United States including the Civil Rights Movement, the American Indian Movement, and the rise of second-wave feminism. In the camping materials examined here, none of these international and national developments are addressed directly; rather, the adults promoting the camps and writing pedagogical materials seem to have preferred a more oblique approach, portraying the summer camp environment as distinct from the world in which these events were occurring. What

materials I could find from campers themselves followed suit. In this way, Christian summer camp was portrayed not quite as a walled garden, but certainly as a kind of Eden: an ideal outdoor setting that was both already past and would inevitably become past once the week at camp was over.

The two youth parachurch organizations I focus on here had slightly different approaches, but their aims and in particular their camping environments were largely the same. Young Life was incorporated in Texas in 1941.⁹⁹ The organization began as a coed after-school Christian club for teenagers, geared toward both those who attended church and the as-yet unreached, as Young Life leadership characterized those who did not practice Christianity. Even before any camping became involved, Young Life was described as a “series of tent meetings for young people,” hearkening back to a great age of American Christian revival.¹⁰⁰ The organization bought its first summer camp property, near Colorado Springs, in 1946, with a second nearby camp following just three years later.¹⁰¹ Today, Young Life runs around 32 camps, most of which are located within the United States.¹⁰² This includes its largest summer camp, which is on the site of what used to be the home base of the Rajneeshpuram movement in Oregon—not just converting the wilderness to Christianity, but colonizing the environments of other religions.¹⁰³

Pioneer Girls (about which more in the next chapter) was founded as Girls Guild in Wheaton, Illinois, in 1939 by students at Wheaton College. It was using the Pioneer Girls name

⁹⁹ Émile Cailliet, *Young Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

¹⁰⁰ Cailliet, 17.

¹⁰¹ Jeff Chesemore, “Eighty Years of Camping,” *Relationships*, Spring 2022; Cailliet, *Young Life*. Notably, this was decades before the founding of Focus on the Family, which is usually characterized as the epicenter of an evangelical takeover of the city.

¹⁰² “Camp Locations - YoungLife.Org,” accessed February 22, 2023, <https://younglife.org/find/camp-locations>.

¹⁰³ Julia Duin, “Inside the Christian Camp That Used to Be Oregon’s Infamous Cult Ranch,” *News, Religion Unplugged*, June 13, 2019, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2019/6/13/inside-the-christian-camp-that-used-to-be-oregons-infamous-cult-ranch>.

by 1941 and was a kind of evangelical Girl Scouts catering to girls from elementary all the way through high school. Pioneer Girls was a no-boys-allowed affair until the 1980s, when the organization began experimenting with a small number of coed groups. The renamed Pioneer Clubs is now fully coed, although within that model many single-gender clubs do exist. Like Young Life, Pioneer Girls also expanded into camping early on. The organization held its first summer camp in Aurora, Illinois, in 1940.¹⁰⁴ By 1973 it ran 23 camps, 19 of them in the United States, although that number is down to just six today.¹⁰⁵ From the beginning, every camp under the Pioneer Girls/Clubs umbrella has been called Camp Cherith, after a refreshing stream found in 1 Kings.¹⁰⁶

Both organizations were pointedly nondenominational, on the theory that general Christian evangelizing was more important than sticking to the rules of any one denomination. This also describes evangelicalism more broadly at this time, making these youth organizations a significant proving ground for the new evangelicalism.¹⁰⁷ Though for much of its history Pioneer Girls groups met primarily in Baptist churches, many other denominations were also represented, and the organization emphasized “Christ in every phase of a girl’s life” over membership in any specific church.¹⁰⁸ Young Life, too, took pains to position itself outside of any one denomination. Indeed, in 1960, almost 20 years after its founding, it faced a major crisis when the Presbytery of

¹⁰⁴ Pioneer Girls, *Cherith Chips*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1943).

¹⁰⁵ “35th Anniversary” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1974), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 11, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; Pioneer Clubs, “Find a Camp,” Pioneer Clubs, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.pioneerclubs.org/camp-cherith/find-a-camp/>.

¹⁰⁶ Pioneer Clubs, “The History of Pioneer Clubs,” Pioneer Clubs, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.pioneerclubs.org/about-us/the-history-of-pioneer-clubs/>; Pioneer Clubs, “The Camp Cherith Name,” Pioneer Clubs, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.pioneerclubs.org/camp-cherith/name-camp-cherith-come/>.

¹⁰⁷ Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*.

¹⁰⁸ Timothy Larsen, “Pioneer Girls: Mid-Twentieth-Century American Evangelicalism’s Girl Scouts,” *The Asbury Journal* 63, no. 2 (2008): 59–79; Pioneer Girls, “Christ in Every Phase of a Girl’s Life” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., ca 1964), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 9, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

Northeast Texas condemned the organization for siphoning off its youth from denominationally specific activities.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, however, it was by positioning themselves alongside other nondenominational evangelical organizations, rather than within any one church, that both parachurch youth organizations were able to pursue their missions of evangelizing both Christian and not(-yet)-Christian youth.¹¹⁰

When developing their summer camps, both organizations tended to buy properties that had already been built, whether as secular camps, retreat centers, or some other place to live in nature. Thus, rather than civilizing the wilderness whole-cloth in the most straightforward manner of the Manifest Destiny narrative, these camps instead Christianized that mythic foundation and oriented it around impressionable children and adolescents. Indeed, to run further with the Manifest Destiny metaphor, the move of appropriating existing environments initially settled by other people is closer to what actually happened than the narrative would imply.

The population of each summer camp session was drawn from participants and friends of participants in existing Young Life or Pioneer Girls groups in the camp's geographic region, bringing together campers who may have already known each other with those with whom potentially lasting friendships could be formed across club lines.¹¹¹ Such friendships seem most likely to have formed within campers' same-sex, same-age cabin groups, which were the people

¹⁰⁹ Roy Riviere, "Letter from Roy R. Riviere to Board and Advisory Committee," March 25, 1960, Collection 20 papers of Herbert J. Taylor, box 70, folder 4, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹¹⁰ This does not mean that Pioneer Girls, Young Life, or other organizations like them did not converge on a particular theology, as numerous scholars of evangelicalism have suggested. See Bielo, *Words upon the Word*; Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution*; Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*; Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*; Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicalism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004); McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*; Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*; Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*.

¹¹¹ Barbara Priddy, "Letter from Barbara Priddy to Marlene," November 8, 1969, Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; "Joyce," "Camp Cherith Echoes...1952," *Hitchin' Post*, October 1952, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, Box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

with whom campers spent most of their time and where most deep discussion was expected to occur. These relationships could be intense, and one Pioneer Girls handbook refers to each cabin group as a camper's "cabin family."¹¹² Such intensity was not unusual for summer camps, and in fact was part of the foundation of the summer-camp project. The difference was that rather than merely forming good citizens to improve the world, evangelical camps aimed to form good *Christians to transform* the world.

Summer camps for American children and adolescents had their inception in the late nineteenth century with an aim to, in the words of historian Leslie Paris, "physically and morally invigorate" largely urban campers in their time off from school.¹¹³ This moral reinvigoration was not necessarily reliant on an explicitly religious approach, although many early summer camps were started by organizations such as the YMCA. For the first several decades of the movement, most summer camps attracted white, middle-class Protestant boys and explicitly forbade Jewish campers from attending. Despite not specifically aiming to bring about conversions like their successors did, these early summer camps engaged in an ambient Protestantism that inevitably impacted ideas about what camp was and what it was for.¹¹⁴ As the movement grew, camps diversified, often exclusively: camps were opened specifically for girls, or Jewish campers, or the children of immigrants, or members of particular organizations. Thus, although summer camps as a category may have diversified, the camps themselves often engaged some particular clientele, forming "villages" of campers who shared something in common in a way that did not naturally occur in most campers' diverse urban environments—to both their benefit and their

¹¹² Kathleen Graham, ed., *Stepping Stones*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1977).

¹¹³ Paris, *Children's Nature*.

¹¹⁴ On the idea of ambient religion, see Matthew Engelke, "Angels in Swindon: Public Religion and Ambient Faith in England," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 155–70.

detriment.¹¹⁵ This trend continued through the rise of the already-segregated suburbs and, with them, the increasing percentage of suburban summer-camp participants; it was largely from this suburban contingent that both Pioneer Girls and Young Life drew their camping populations.

Regardless of their particular market, however, summer camps all had in common the promotion of a “carefree childhood,” a middle-class ideal (regardless of campers’ actual economic positionality) that began to be cemented around the same time the summer camp movement began.¹¹⁶ This was especially true in the post-World War II era, with the increasing prevalence of intensive child-rearing.¹¹⁷ Summer camp presented an opportunity to use a nostalgic idea of childhood to create good middle-class citizens. Evangelical summer camps took this idea and gave it a religious character, aiming to create not only citizens but Christians, and even evangelists. Notably, the childhood ideal was conceived of as male by default, a phenomenon touched on briefly in the introduction to this work. Early summer camps were specifically for boys, and often if a single-gender camp became coed later on, or added a second parallel camp, the original camp was boys-only.¹¹⁸ Activities at camp tended to be initially designed with boys in mind, with adjustments made for subsequent girl campers such as the swapping of baseball for arts and crafts.¹¹⁹ This boyhood default may have allowed girls to enjoy activities to which they may not have had access outside camp, but it also perpetuated the idea that American childhood was defined according to an unmarked boyhood. Like Jewish campers, girl campers were an interest group rather than an obvious consumer base.¹²⁰ Much like the

¹¹⁵ Paris, *Children’s Nature*.

¹¹⁶ Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness*.

¹¹⁷ For more on ever-more-involved American parenting, see Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 141–63.

¹¹⁸ One summer camp for girls run by the Southern Baptist Convention, for instance, was called Camp Crestridge, and was located on the site of a boys’ camp and denominational conference center called Ridgecrest. “Welcome to Camp Crestridge for Girls” (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1956), AR 795-555 Ridgecrest Conference Center, box 11, folder 3, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

¹¹⁹ Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness*.

¹²⁰ For more on Jewish summer camps, see Fox, *The Jews of Summer*.

ambient Protestantism of early summer camps, then, later camps of all stripes continued to carry the legacy of a childhood implicitly gendered male.

Although the broader (ambiently Christian, ambiently white, ambiently masculine) summer camp movement began in the 1880s, evangelical summer camps of the type examined here only hit the scene in the 1940s and 1950s. Although camps were variously started by denominations and nondenominational parachurch organizations, the former tended to have a large amount of independence, placing them in what Rebecca Koerselman has called a “unique space between parachurch organizations and denominational structures.”¹²¹ Regardless of their links with particular denominations—and the specific camps examined here were officially independent—evangelical summer camps functioned something like a separate category of parachurch organization, orienting postwar evangelicalism toward a focus on children and youth through a critical nostalgia directed at both children themselves and the wilderness environment in which they were placed for stretches of the summer.

Camp nostalgia provided a respite from the present. During the Cold War, the air was thick with concern about imminent nuclear war. In this context, it may be considered that summer camps were in a position to pivot and train campers in wilderness skills they may need after the end of the world. However, in reality, American summer camps both secular and religious were more likely to relate to the outdoors and the camping experience in terms of a lost past that, if regained, could redeem the present. One thirteen-year-old conveyed this in the pages

¹²¹ Rebecca A. Koerselman, “‘Invading Vacationland for Christ’: The Construction of Evangelical Identity through Summer Camps in the Postwar Era” (Ph.D., United States -- Michigan, Michigan State University, 2013), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1437664772/abstract/317399A2F9694BDAPQ/1>.

of a 1966 Pioneer Girls publication, writing in a poem, “If only the world could rest here / We’d have our problems solved in a year.”¹²²

This nostalgia for the purity of nature was part of a long American tradition, much of it religious even if not always part of the evangelicalism that is my focus here. The narrative of white people in America, after all, begins with the Puritans’ “errand into the wilderness”—a story that was especially popular as the United States found its new place in the Cold War world order.¹²³ The story of white Americans in the wilderness continued through Emerson, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalists’ spiritual attachment to unspoiled nature; Manifest Destiny and the white settling of the American frontier (another story popular during this period); and the religious imperatives behind the creation of the National Park System.¹²⁴ Indeed, even putting aside the religious character of the summer camps discussed here, reverence for particular past versions of the outdoors that downplays or ignores the land’s long habitation by indigenous communities has long been part of American civil religion. As such, by the Cold War era it was important for white adults to pass on beliefs and practices around the ideal of unspoiled American nature to the children who would carry those traditions into the future, in contrast to the industrialized Soviet threat. The central figures in these American wilderness narratives were (largely) white and (often) male, bent on setting out into an unpeopled natural environment to simultaneously conquer it and use it to access spiritual truths about the American continent. Both are themes worth bearing in mind when considering the use of wilderness in all summer camps, and especially those evangelical camps whose end goal was conquering America for Christ.

¹²² Cathy, “I Am Cathy: I Am 13,” *Compass*, Spring 1966, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 23, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹²³ Murphy, *Growing up with America*.

¹²⁴ Evan Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Kerry Mitchell, *Spirituality and the State: Managing Nature and Experience in America’s National Parks* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

Literary scholar Emily A. Murphy has proposed that, prior to the Cold War, Americans understood their national identity through a lens of innocence, comparing the nation to a child in ways both implicit and explicit.¹²⁵ But after two world wars, Murphy argues, the country (or at least the country's educated elite) registered that loss of innocence in a transformation of identity, with literature of the era tending more toward adolescent protagonists struggling toward adulthood. A large component of that identity transformation was nostalgia for the vanishing figure of the rural child, and in particular the rural boy, in the face of a modern industrialized society. Considered in this light, the rapid rise of summer camp as an important part of American childhood makes sense, as adults figuratively sent their children into the lost past in order to create Americans who could redeem the future. For white evangelicals, this past was not only wholesome but specifically Christian, whether a past Christian America (often imagined as part of the frontier) or the wilderness of the biblical past engaged by everyone from Abraham to Jesus Christ.

The summer camp materials I examine here rarely use the term "wilderness" explicitly, instead turning to less loaded terms such as "nature" and "the outdoors." It is nevertheless the term I use precisely *because* it is loaded with the theology and history that the evangelical summer camp enterprise leaned on to create its nostalgic pedagogical environment. Nostalgia for a once and future Christian society was at the heart of the project, and wilderness has long been a part of American Christian narratives, beginning with the Puritans' wilderness errand. This history soon moves on to Methodist circuit riders spreading the Gospel in isolated white frontier communities and, most significant for the evangelical story, camp revivals. These multiday outdoor church meetings became popular in the early nineteenth century and were an important

¹²⁵ Murphy, *Growing up with America*.

marker of the early evangelical movement.¹²⁶ Despite the fact that camp meetings and summer camp represent two apparently different strands of evangelical experience separated in time, the weeklong structure of most such camps was, in fact, inspired by the camp revival tradition.¹²⁷ This genealogy is worth bearing in mind especially in the context of evangelical nostalgia and its relationship to both wilderness and the idea of a Christian America.

A New (Old) Community

One way summer camp has been described is as a kind of *tabula rasa*; in the words of historian Björn Lundberg, it “offered an abstract space...that could be filled with meaning to counterbalance urban modernity.”¹²⁸ Camp not only represented a pastoral past, but also served as a “place beyond civilization or culture,” theoretically creating an opportunity for campers to build an ideal society from the ground up. In the case of evangelical summer camps, this idealized society was pointedly Christian, a short-term wilderness utopia. Christianity was, in fact, essential to this utopic project: as individuals are reborn in Christ, so society could be reborn at summer camp.

Adults working for both Young Life and the Pioneer Girls (and, for that matter, elsewhere) were ready to note the bad influences of the world on malleable children and teenagers. One Young Life counselor orientation handbook articulates a bleak view of the camper population, noting that “the teenager is the product of two inheritances; one being the state of inability and sin inherited from Adam, and the other being the sum total of the influences

¹²⁶ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*; Russell E. Richey, *Methodism in the American Forest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹²⁷ Jacob Sorenson, *Sacred Playgrounds: Christian Summer Camp in Theological Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

¹²⁸ Lundberg, “Localized Internationalism.”

that bear upon his life.”¹²⁹ Those influences, articulated here and in sundry other materials about the Christian youth of America in this period, include conformity-driven peers, “slick” magazines and obscene literature, materialistic social values, and potentially domineering or else too-lenient parents. Read in this light, camp’s removal from civilization’s negative influences offered a chance to jump-start campers’ lives as Christians without the complicating factors that might arise even in an after-school youth group.

Generally summer camps, and not just Christian ones, relied on the idea that campers could be best set up for success if they started in a nebulously premodern environment. One difference was that for evangelical camps, this success was specifically framed as religious: creating a new society also entailed creating a new person, and Christianizing the child and the outdoor environment could ultimately, through campers’ nostalgia for the Christian world of camp, lead to Christianizing the actual world. This often meant the suburban American world from which campers were pulled. Stories abound of campers returning with a desire to convert other students at their schools or members of their own families.¹³⁰

However, a desire to evangelize the wider world is apparent in dispatches from camps run by missionaries: one report from a Camp Cherith in the then-Territory of Hawaii notes that most campers’ parents “worship idols” and asks for prayers that the girls will be able to maintain their Christianity (and thereby change their heathen society) once camp is over.¹³¹ The Pioneer

¹²⁹ “Young Life Leadership: Orientation in Camp Counseling” (Young Life, n.d.), Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College. See also Hope Warwick and Kathy Graham, “A Profile of Today’s Girl” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., June 1971), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 8, folder 27, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹³⁰ Orien Johnson, “Letter from Orien Johnson,” Fundraising letter, n.d., Collection 20 papers of Herbert J. Taylor, box 70, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; Alison F. Short, “How Janet Gave Away Her Hands,” *Hitchin’ Post*, December 1957, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 21, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹³¹ “Camp Cherith in Hawaii,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1954, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College. For the importance of the figure of

Girls also sponsored missionaries to other countries who sometimes held Christian summer camps of their own. Melani McAlister has proposed that American evangelicalism's Cold War-era international focus often relied on young people to achieve its goals; summer camps led by young people to evangelize even younger ones were a small but undeniable part of that.¹³²

The premodern ideal employed by camps both religious and not goes part of the way to showing that summer camp has long been both a vehicle for and an object of nostalgia. It is the former—the tendency to valorize camp as a return to the freedom of pastoralism—that drove most of the summer-camp project, but especially for evangelicals, the latter also played its role. Leslie Paris has written of the early twentieth-century summer camp movement, “camp advocates aimed to return children to rural environments, in the context not of productive labor but of productive leisure.”¹³³ This “return” functioned as a manifestation of critical nostalgia. In terms of summer camp, the past being referenced was the carefree, preindustrial time that hearkened back to the Romantics and Transcendentalists and was negatively contrasted with the urban, scheduled, mechanized postindustrial era. If they could inculcate a love of disappearing wilderness in the next generation, early summer-camp creators believed, that the next generation would then have the knowledge to create a better future.

The idea of the wilderness disappearing was the key to the nostalgia at the heart of the summer camp enterprise. Camp inculcated a nostalgia for a past that neither campers nor their parents or counselors had actually experienced. Indeed, especially during the Cold War era examined here, with even Alaska and Hawaii having reached statehood or close to it, Manifest Destiny as it applied to the American continent (as space) wasn't an option anymore, so camps

the heathen in American Christianity, see Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

¹³² McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*.

¹³³ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 88.

employed nostalgia for it toward the new project of Manifest Destiny as it applied to the world (as mindset). For evangelicals, this Manifest Destiny mindset was especially salient. Lauren Kerby has argued that, for white evangelicals, “the past provides a blueprint for how things ought to be: Christians running a Christian nation.”¹³⁴ Thus, a narrative of civilizing (and Christianizing) the American continent by sending pioneers out into the wilderness was easily applied to the present: bringing children into the wilderness to affectively reenact the imagined Christianizing activities of their forebears. This created another kind of nostalgia: the children’s own nostalgia for summer camp, where they enjoyed an idyllic, rustic Christian America—a Christian America they may themselves, in another critical-nostalgic turn, have then wanted to create in the “real world.” Evangelical summer camps were not only built on nostalgia, then, but also created a pedagogy of nostalgia to cultivate this value within the next generation.

In addition to the nostalgia for a vague past that is part of the general summer-camp project, evangelical summer camps practiced other nostalgias informed by their form of Christianity. One of these was nostalgia for a biblical past and desire to become close to the feelings of the early church and even earlier. Evangelicals have long enacted this biblical critical nostalgia in their rejection of so-called smells, bells, and other accretions of church history; their (allegedly) straightforward reading of scripture; and their widely reported feelings of embattlement. Even during the Cold War’s fight against godless communism, that fight was sometimes envisioned as a modern-day version of early Christians being oppressed by—and ultimately becoming victorious over—pagan Rome.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Kerby, *Saving History*, 6.

¹³⁵ See, e.g., “Explorer Leadership Conference 1968” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1968), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 13, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

This biblical nostalgia has been enacted in the prevalence of contemporary music at worship services and the rise of home churches in the present.¹³⁶ I argue that it is, and has been in the past, also practiced in the world of church camp. The entirely Christian society of the evangelical summer camp had the potential to create the kind of evangelical community that was impossible to achieve in once-a-week services, or even in a midcentury evangelical environment increasingly saturated with new parachurch organizations. Summer camp's employment of a wilderness fantasy, in particular, evokes two distinct strands of evangelical nostalgia: the biblical wilderness as a place for the believer to be challenged and eventually achieve a closer relationship with God, and the early American wilderness at the heart of the Christianizing mission of Manifest Destiny (narratives that are, of course, not unrelated). In both narratives, wilderness presents an opportunity to take on the Great Commission, and engagement with that wilderness ends in the salvation of the believer and, sometimes, the world.

In addition to nostalgias for biblical and American wildernesses, a third strand of nostalgia also plays a role in the project of evangelical summer camp: adults' nostalgia for childhood itself. As other scholars have noted, children represent a key tension for adults: they are both the product of a fallen past and the embodied hope for a better future.¹³⁷ They are, as Anne Higonnet has noted, *inevitably* objects of nostalgia: they bring to mind adults' own lives as children, which those adults tend to imagine as perfectly innocent compared to where they are in life now.¹³⁸ These characteristics, utopian future plus object of nostalgia, make childhood an ideal site for adults to practice nostalgia—and summer camp, with its image as a controlled yet somehow also untamed wilderness, an ideal location to do it.

¹³⁶ Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*.

¹³⁷ Burlein, *Lift High the Cross*; Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children*.

¹³⁸ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*.

As numerous scholars before me have argued, children and teenagers also occupy a special place within American evangelicalism. Their status as future redeemers of the world notably led, in the Cold War era and after, to a focus on them within the tradition, driven by a fear of what might happen were they to grow up ungodly.¹³⁹ This very fear of a potential lost future, however, concomitantly fed into a nostalgia for the purity of childhood, free from the worries of the future. These strands of nostalgia all combined at summer camp, with adults nostalgic for childhood using nostalgia to teach children and teenagers how to be nostalgic themselves, all to build toward a more Christian future.

It is important to reiterate here that not all of the children and teenagers in this archive are real. Some may have been fictionalized versions of real campers, while others appear to have been invented whole cloth by adults working to promote their summer camps to either patrons or potential future campers. Nevertheless, even these imaginary campers are of interest, particularly in how they show both adults' goals for summer camp and the nostalgia of those adults for the kind of childhood shown in the stories they write. The exercise of writing about or as (potentially fictional) children allowed the adult authors to engage with the sentimental strand of American evangelical affect, a hallmark of which is characterizing all Christians as children, no matter how old.¹⁴⁰ By inventing or even inhabiting the voice of a child, the adult authors of these pieces may also have been engaging in yet another form of critical nostalgia, reaching toward a childlike faith they desired for themselves.

Hardest to pin down are the stories of anonymous campers that adults used in fundraising letters. These letters often included short paragraphs describing the impact of camp on different students, many of them girls, who converted at camp or returned to school with a zeal for

¹³⁹ Bivins, *Religion of Fear*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

¹⁴⁰ Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel*, 7.

evangelism.¹⁴¹ Because these campers go unidentified, it is unclear whether these stories are true, inspired by true stories, or entirely made up. I point this out not to accuse camp fundraisers of fabrication, but to propose that these anonymous and potentially invented stories gave a clear lesson in faith and the importance of camp that real life almost never can. These stories presented idealized children and adolescents, and girls in particular, as success stories in order to raise money for programs intended to impact real campers.

More fascinating, though, are the published letters, particularly common in the Pioneer Girls archive, purported to be written by campers themselves. These letters, published beginning in the October 1952 edition of the organization's *Hitchin' Post* newsletter, encouraged girls to sign up for Camp Cherith through a fictional girl's reminiscences of her own time at camp the previous summer. Beyond the clear promotional character of these letters—one starts off singing the praises of the great food at Camp Cherith—there are other reasons to be suspicious of their provenance.¹⁴² For one, the *Hitchin' Post* also published stories written by campers themselves in its annual writing contest. In these stories, girls are identified by first and last name and city of residence, whereas the authors of the promotional letters are given only first names. Furthermore, whereas winners of the contest tended to focus their stories on one particular event, the promotional letters (one of which was given an introductory paragraph explaining that it was mysteriously left in the corner of a cabin instead of being mailed¹⁴³) cover all of the best aspects of camp to get readers excited. Even the drawbacks are laughed off, like one alleged camper who “really didn't mind K.P. [kitchen patrol] very much.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Johnson, “Letter from Orien Johnson,” n.d.

¹⁴² “Echoes 1952.”

¹⁴³ “Rescued from a Trash Can,” *Hitchin' Post*, October 1954, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁴⁴ “Echoes 1952.” Emphasis in original.

Despite being fabricated, these letters are still valuable for how they convey what adults hoped their charges would get out of the summer-camp experience, especially considering that they were published in the Pioneer Girls' participant-facing newsletter. Authors may have thought that potential campers would be more credulous of the letters' rosy portrayals of Camp Cherith if they came from a fellow camper rather than an authority with a vested interest in their enrollment. These letters allowed adults to create an idealized peer or friend for the actual girls in their audience—perhaps a friend they would even get the chance to meet next year at camp. Because children represent the future, as Anna Strhan has noted, “their involvement or non-involvement in religion can therefore provoke anxiety.”¹⁴⁵ Adults assuage this anxiety by working to keep children within a religion by means of instruction and, in the evangelical context, positive religious relationships. While evangelicalism is built on the practitioner's personal relationship with God and Jesus, Strhan observes that evangelical adults also work to ensure children form positive interpersonal relationships within the church. By writing in the form of a potential church-world friend, and about other (also fictional) friends, adults could model what that kind of relational religion should look like.

A Disciplined Wilderness

A theme of summer camps generally around this time is that they leaned into the idea of wilderness while at the same time enforcing discipline among young campers with strategies like schedules and chore rotations. However, the freedoms of wilderness and the constrictions of discipline were not as opposed as they may seem, and each side of the coin tended to inform the other. In the case of the Christian summer camps I discuss here, the wilderness was engaged in

¹⁴⁵ Strhan, *The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Evangelicalism*, 2.

theological terms to enforce prayer practices and to teach campers to *want* to maintain religious discipline.

The wilderness at camp, after all, was itself disciplined. Like national parks, summer camps worked to control and commodify the outdoors toward a goal of introducing children to a more wholesome world from before the rise of cities and industry.¹⁴⁶ The wilderness created at camp, however, could not be too controlled, lest character-building opportunities associated with the frontier era slip by. The American summer camp movement aimed not to recreate the past wholesale, but to employ critical nostalgia toward recreating the right parts of the past. Although the earliest summer camps did look more like camping in the woods, by the Cold War era camp architecture had become increasingly specialized, with dedicated areas for activities like swimming, playing, crafting, and worship. Most of the camps discussed here, in fact, were not built by Young Life or Pioneer Girls but rather already existed as properties either for other summer camps or for other forms of outdoor recreation; the sites were merely purchased and elaborated upon by their Christian owners. Despite the focused construction of these environments, however, the aesthetic ideal of wilderness was foregrounded, allowing organizers to present the experience as rugged and pastoral while also controlling just how wild the wilderness of camp could actually be.

At Christian summer camps, this meant creating a wilderness that was the best possible place to form evangelical subjects, and through this environment creating discipline in the campers themselves. A large portion of this entailed characterizing the outdoors as an ideal environment for hearing the voice of God. Sometimes the results manifested in dramatic fashion: Marion Perrigo, an elementary school-aged Pioneer Girl from New Jersey, won the

¹⁴⁶ Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness*.

organization's annual summer camp writing contest in 1952 with a story that mirrored biblical tales of wandering in the wilderness. Her group got lost in the night, with four flashlights doing little to penetrate the darkness. Feeling "pathetically small and helpless," Perrigo wrote, the group sat down to rest, pray, and read the Bible. "Suddenly," she continued, "a great peace filled our hearts," and as so often happens in the Bible, God "directed our footsteps to the road that led to camp."¹⁴⁷

But more often, finding God in the primeval(-ish) wilderness happened more quietly. Both networks of summer camps, in addition to daily Bible studies and nightly theological discussions, instituted times for campers to pray alone in the outdoors. At the various Camps Cherith, campers received Morning Watch booklets, small devotionals to use outdoors at set times every morning. In explaining how the practice should work, a booklet from 1973 instructs campers to find "a quiet place...to talk with God / the God who made the trees that shade you... / the pine needles and sand to walk on..."¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile, a 1978 edition makes clear the relationship between the camper praying alone in the controlled wilderness of camp and the Bible story of Jesus going alone to pray in the wilderness.¹⁴⁹ Camp Cherith sent campers home with new Morning Watch booklets to continue their practice every morning, and eventually began publishing the daily devotionals in the organization's monthly.¹⁵⁰ It is difficult to determine how widespread the post-camp practice ended up being, but at least one letter to the

¹⁴⁷ Bunny Eide, Lois Lorand, and Marion Perrigo, "Judges Announce Camp Contest Winners," *Hitchin' Post*, December 1952, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁴⁸ Dorothy Knox, "You and the Early Church: Colonist Morning Watch" (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1973), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 4, folder 26, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Murray, "My Morning Watch" (Camp Cherith, 1978), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁵⁰ Eunice Russell, "Morning Watch," *Trails*, December 1964, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; Shirley McKay, "Morning Watch," *Reflection*, December 1973, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 8, folder 1, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

Hitchin' Post newsletter indicates that, for the author, encouragement to continue Morning Watch after camp worked as intended.¹⁵¹

Incorporating wilderness into prayer discipline, at least according to some reports, seems to have had the intended effect. Everett, the Young Life camper who wrote the letter to Tom Raley that opened this chapter, noted that the “different atmosphere” of camp, and in particular the twenty quiet minutes campers spent each day in prayer, made her want to be more disciplined in her religious practices.¹⁵² Stories like this were valuable to the organization: one Young Life mailer from this period tells the story of a girl for whom camp attendance resulted in a disciplined prayer practice both at camp and afterward. The narrative was part of a bigger fundraising push for Star Ranch, at the time the organization’s marquee camp.¹⁵³ Clearly Christian camp’s unique ability to create religious discipline in young people was valuable to the larger evangelical movement, even within circles already dedicated to evangelizing the youth of America.

The other forms of discipline practiced at these camps, the ones common to American summer camps more generally, were also, unsurprisingly, presented through a religious lens. Usually this meant counselors and campers talking about room inspections and kitchen patrol in the same breath as Bible study and testimony, but one (fictional, promotional) story stands out for its portrayal of what organizers hoped camp could be for participants. In the story, written by a counselor at a Camp Cherith and published in the Pioneer Girls’ *Hitchin' Post* newsletter in 1957, the heroine resents having to do chores at camp until she realizes that those chores are God working through her. She then decides to help out more at home when camp is over so that her

¹⁵¹ Eide, Lorand, and Perrigo, “Camp Contest Winners.”

¹⁵² Everett to Raley, “Letter from Jacky Everett to Tom Raley,” August 4, 1973.

¹⁵³ Johnson, “Letter from Orien Johnson,” n.d.

unsaved mother can have more time to learn about Jesus.¹⁵⁴ This was not just wishful thinking: the very real Everett notes in her letter, too, that she felt a “special joy...in serving Christ by cleaning the prop room, washing windows and mopping floors.”¹⁵⁵

All of this discipline had a pedagogical purpose: creating better Christians or, for those who arrived at camp unconverted, creating new ones. Chores at coed camps also tended to be gendered, incorporating yet another form of discipline, appropriate gender performance, into the mix.¹⁵⁶ Materials for Young Life counselors emphasize the disciplined, rational character of the Christian life, noting that “emotion is not a method to find God, but a response.”¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, counselors not much older than their charges were instructed to be firm and emotionally stable, which sometimes led to angst on the part of the counselors. Arlie Hochschild has called this kind of affective control in service of an interpersonal job emotional labor and noted that it is especially a factor in positions that tend to be held by women.¹⁵⁸ All of this affective control, however, was aimed not at suppression of emotion but instead at creating the right kind of emotion to create a lasting born-again experience. Despite instructing counselors not to lead or let their campers *lead* with emotion, Young Life counseling materials also noted that “no decision was ever made by the head alone, the heart must be touched.”¹⁵⁹ The disciplined wilderness of camp, then, was intended not just to develop disciplined religious practices, but also to create religious affective discipline that would allow campers to, in the manner of their wider evangelical community, feel Jesus in their hearts.

¹⁵⁴ Short, “How Janet Gave Away Her Hands.”

¹⁵⁵ Everett to Raley, “Letter from Jacky Everett to Tom Raley,” August 4, 1973.

¹⁵⁶ Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness*.

¹⁵⁷ “Orientation.”

¹⁵⁸ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Updated, with a new preface (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

¹⁵⁹ “The Decision and Follow-Up” (Young Life, n.d.), Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

Camps used wilderness as a tool and metaphor in areas beyond explicitly building prayer discipline. Camp Cherith materials, in particular, tended to reinforce the parallels between the environment at camp and Biblical times. Girls were encouraged to imagine themselves as Biblical heroes, as in an advertisement for Camp Cherith that pointed out: “When we look into our Bible, we find that one of the greatest and wealthiest Hebrews who ever lived made his home in tents—Abraham.”¹⁶⁰ Although the part of Abraham’s story that is arguably most wilderness-oriented focuses on a woman—Hagar—girls were largely encouraged to imagine themselves in the roles of Biblical men, who were perhaps more commonly understood as representing the independence and self-sufficiency that the Pioneer Girls promoted to its charges. In this case, they were encouraged to imagine themselves in the place and time of Abraham, whose location in the untouched wilderness is implied to have played a large part in his role as the Bible’s foundational patriarch. If campers could experience this kind of wilderness from the past, then they, too, could be positioned to push their own religious tradition to ever greater heights.

Gender at Camp and in Time

Much like the Pioneer Girls organization specifically, evangelical summer camps generally instructed female participants in a Christian girlhood that was distinct from the Christian womanhood into which they would later grow. In an advertisement for Camp Cherith in a Pioneer Girls guidebook from 1950, the organization claims for girlhood a group of characteristics that has been historically more commonly associated with boyhood or yet-to-be-gendered childhood: “The desire to be out-of-doors,” the ad reads, “to be able to get along without the comforts of modern living, and to learn new things about nature seems to be born

¹⁶⁰ *Pioneer Girls Trail Book*, 8th ed. (Chicago: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1950), 155. The seemingly out-of-nowhere nod to Abraham’s wealth was not out of place for the Pioneer Girls; the organization frequently pointed to wealth and power, in particular in its discussions of patriarchs and presidents, in order to highlight those traits’ compatibility with American values.

into every normal American girl.”¹⁶¹ The use of “normal” here is especially interesting, implying that perhaps a gendered preoccupation with home-oriented activities was *not* normal and may need to be rectified.

Part of the project of childhood and (especially) adolescence is to learn to be a gendered subject. For evangelicals in the Cold War era discussed here up through the present, those gender roles have widely been understood as religious practices. Gender in white American evangelicalism is understood to be God-given, and therefore properly being a boy or girl, and future man or woman, is part of being a good Christian.¹⁶² Here my focus is on girls, and it is important to point out that the role of girls and the role of women in this model were not the same: the normal traits of girls described above were not the normal traits of women, and children and teenagers attended summer camp largely during the transition period from one to the other. Sometimes the pedagogy of gender at camp was subtle, as in the statements about what being a normal girl meant, and sometimes it was explicit: in an undated strategy report from Young Life titled “Objectives of the Adolescent Period,” the second objective is “establishing heterosexual interests,” and goals within that objective included transitioning teenagers from “interest in members of the same sex” (presumably platonically, but the author does not specify) to “interest in members of the opposite sex.”¹⁶³ One place to do that was, perhaps surprisingly, in single-sex settings.

Christian summer camp was, to varying degrees, a homosocial environment. Some, like the Camps Cherith from the 1940s through the early 1980s, were entirely single-sex; others, like

¹⁶¹ *Pioneer Girls Trail Book*, 155.

¹⁶² John P. Bartkowski, *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiation in Evangelical Families* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*; Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*.

¹⁶³ “Objectives of the Adolescent Period” (Young Life, n.d.), Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

all of the Young Life camps as well as Cherith after boys' and coed programs were introduced, were coed but separated boys and girls into different cabins with whom they spent not only nighttime hours but, in fact, most of their time. In addition to reflecting social norms, this move theoretically provided a straightforward environment where campers could be taught gendered religious expectations. Of course, coed camps involved more gender segregation in theory than in practice, as Sandra Fox has shown in her discussion of Jewish summer camps employing campers' sexual interest in each other toward marriage-oriented ends.¹⁶⁴ However, the materials I work with here do not include how this gender segregation actually shook out, and therefore I focus on the goals of summer camp homosociality rather than its lived experience. By excluding the opposite sex from many of a cabin's activities, and in particular their deeper discussions, adult organizers both allowed campers the freedom to experiment with and ask questions about their gendered experiences and (theoretically) preserved their sexual innocence, a metonym for more general aspirational innocence rooted in nostalgia for childhood.

This is evident in one 1973 Morning Watch devotional for Pioneer Girls campers around middle-school age, called "You and the Early Church."¹⁶⁵ I choose to analyze this particular document because, while many camping materials are implicitly gendered, this one is rather explicit in its focus on what makes a good Christian girl and, subsequently, woman, in the context of how that related to her (understood) gender opposite. In a lesson entitled "GUYS! Yea!! GUYS! Ugh!!", camp's homosocial environment is addressed at the outset. "Why think about guys at camp?" it asks, as though boys should be the last thing from campers' minds in the parallel universe of summer camp. Rather than dwelling on the needlessness of thinking about boys at camp, however, the anonymous author of the lesson quickly pivots to memories of her

¹⁶⁴ Fox, *The Jews of Summer*.

¹⁶⁵ Knox, "You and the Early Church."

own junior high experience, when she thought about boys all the time—but what she was not considering was “what God wanted me to think about guys.” Here, the devotional’s author employs a pedagogical nostalgia, this time using memories of her own childhood to create a better version of it for her girl readers.

The lesson focuses on a passage from Genesis describing the courtship of the patriarch Isaac and his eventual wife Rebekah, asking girls to think specifically about “what it was about the girl that caused her to be chosen for a bride” and whether the reader herself had the same qualities. When Rebekah first appears halfway through the passage, she is described first as beautiful and a virgin, then as kind and helpful, and finally as modest. These are characteristics that appear throughout the evangelical conversation around complementarian gender roles, but what is striking is that, apart from kindness and helpfulness, the virtues demonstrated in the passage are not the same virtues (outdoorsiness, independence) that were otherwise highlighted at camp.¹⁶⁶ That is not to say that these virtues are opposites. Rather, they all served to situate a girl in time, with some virtues more important in girlhood and others more important in womanhood.

This devotional lesson thereby serves, perhaps unintentionally, to highlight those differences, pointing to the idea that evangelical girls were not merely evangelical women in miniature but a different category of practitioner with different needs and characteristics. Girlhood has long been conceptualized by adults as a distinct life stage that, though especially prone to corruption, is also a time of freedom and adventurousness before the constraints of womanhood set in.¹⁶⁷ Girl and woman are both gendered here, but in different ways and sometimes in contrast to one another. Late childhood and adolescence, then, represented a

¹⁶⁶ On evangelical femininity, see Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021); Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*; Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*.

¹⁶⁷ Driscoll, *Girls*; Gonick, *Between Femininities*; Paris, “Adventures of Peanut and Bo.”

transition period from one kind of femininity to the other, and camp a safe place to make it happen. These theories of girlhood and adolescence have been explored at length by girlhood studies scholars, but, as with American summer camp itself, evangelical environments distinctly inflected what exactly these femininities were, and thus how the transition period worked.

As it wraps up, the lesson briefly pivots away from considering its reader as a future wife. Concluding that the Bible passage shows that God wants love between girls and boys/women and men, the author clarifies: “brother/sister kind [of love] for us and husband/wife kind for married people.”¹⁶⁸ Here, after encouraging girls to consider what they need to do to become good future wives, the devotional places them right back in the present. *The kind of love Isaac and Rebekah had is for husbands and wives*, the lesson seems to say, *but we, the youth, need only to consider boys as brothers in a Christlike sense.* (As has long been common to the evangelical purity culture to be discussed in chapter 3, no time is spent on getting from the one to the other, though this sudden jump is far less common in the Cold War period than it would become later.) Here was laid bare evangelical understanding of the temporality of girlhood, in the twentieth century and beyond: girls as future wives and righteous church members, and also girls as eternally inhabiting an innocent, sexless childhood. That innocence is preserved in the pastoral virgin land of summer camp, but girls must be prepared for the boys beyond.

Creating Christians

A centerpiece of life at camp was the conversion experience. Instructions for counselors at Young Life camps during the 1960s and 1970s encouraged them to lead their campers “to the point of decision,” not pressuring them to come to Jesus but definitely pushing them in that

¹⁶⁸ Knox, “You and the Early Church.”

direction.¹⁶⁹ The process involved three basic steps: talking with a camper extensively one-on-one and ensuring they understood “the truth of the Gospel”; explaining “how to invite the Lord into your heart”; and having the camper pray, which they should do on their own with extensive explanation from the counselor, including another three-point checklist. Some counselors reported feeling pressured to say the exact right things, to the point of feeling like they were roleplaying.¹⁷⁰ Still, the organization continued to give very specific instructions to counselors attempting to lead their charges to conversion.

Materials from both networks of summer camps show a preoccupation with conversion. Both winners of the 1951 Camp Cherith writing contest told stories of summer camp conversion, one of a friend’s and one of her own; both responded to a prompt about their “Most Treasured Experience at Camp Cherith.”¹⁷¹ Fundraising letters, too, always seemed to make note of campers who dedicated their lives to Christ over the previous camping season.¹⁷² Missionaries running American-style Christian summer camps abroad reported on their own successes—and sometimes the opposite: in 1957, a missionary in (West) Germany, reporting on her camp in the Pioneer Girls newsletter, included a photo of a camper who “went home without Christ” and asked for prayers for the “free thinker.”¹⁷³

At set times every night across both networks of camps, campers were invited to discuss Bible lessons with their cabin or in a bigger group around a campfire; these rituals were designed

¹⁶⁹ “The Decision.”

¹⁷⁰ Kay, “Letter from Kay to Barbara Priddy,” July 21, 1962, Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁷¹ Bunny Eide and Diane Watson, “Camp Cherith Writing Contest,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1951, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 18, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁷² E.g., Dick Langford, “Letter from Dick Langford,” Fundraising letter, April 27, 1949, Collection 20 papers of Herbert J. Taylor, box 70, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; Martin Walt, “Letter from Martin Walt,” April 27, 1949, Collection 20 papers of Herbert J. Taylor, box 70, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁷³ “Eaglet Counsels in German Camp,” *Hitchin’ Post*, December 1957, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 21, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

to include campers learning these lessons for the first time. Counseling materials from both Young Life and Pioneer Girls show that both organizations arranged for Bible study activities to build over the course of the week, reaching a crescendo on the last night of camp. At Young Life camp, counselors were encouraged to allow campers to “give a word for the Lord” on the last night, offering a platform for campers to convert each other, peer to peer.¹⁷⁴ Camp Cherith also encouraged campers to convert peers by using the last night to encourage them to think about “whom you’ll share Jesus with” and to share that person’s first name. Counselors were instructed to write down those first names next to the camper’s name in order to “refer to that list and keep praying for them.”¹⁷⁵

Building a conversion strategy around a short summer camp experience speaks to the perceived ease of having frequent conversations around the topic in what was understood as an isolated, totally Christian society in the wilderness: “Nowhere is the bond of Christian love stronger than at camp,” wrote one Camp Cherith participant in 1952.¹⁷⁶ Summer camp was, indeed, frequently counterposed to “the world,” which both participants and organizers portrayed as full of bad influences. Removing children to a Christian wilderness environment could potentially jump-start their lives as Christians. This, combined with the fact that camp was often just a week or two long, engendered an intensity that was not found in a modern, pluralistic world. In a letter Tom Raley wrote back to Jacky Everett, Raley observes, “It just seemed like from your letter everything that we want to have happen in the life of a kid, and every thing that

¹⁷⁴ “Orientation.”

¹⁷⁵ “Giving Myself to God and Others” (Camp Cherith, 1978), 46, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁷⁶ Eide, Lorand, and Perrigo, “Camp Contest Winners.”

we want them to see in the different parts of the program, God seemed to really say to you in the course of that week.”¹⁷⁷

Indeed, although camp was idealized as “a week to forget the confines of society”, its end was rarely far from organizers’ minds.¹⁷⁸ Guides for Young Life counselors cautioned them to ensure right away that their new converts have a Christian adult to guide them once they came back to the real world and to collect cards with each camper’s information so that progress could be shared between counselors and the camper’s “home field.”¹⁷⁹ Those leaving Camp Cherith brought home Morning Watch devotionals to continue their Bible reading practices at home, even if doing so was acknowledged to be more difficult when the camper was not surrounded by nature.¹⁸⁰

Christians newly minted in this intensely Christian environment could then bring lessons from camp back into what one Young Life organizer called the “valley,” perhaps likening the Christian camp environment to a mountaintop or city on a hill.¹⁸¹ At least, this is what the organizing adults hoped for. The critical-nostalgic goal of evangelical summer camp was made explicit in a number of different venues: one Young Life fundraising letter points to a new camp convert who then worked to convert everyone at her school.¹⁸² A different letter, this one published in the Pioneer Girls newsletter in 1953, puts the same sentiment in the words of a

¹⁷⁷ Tom Raley, “Letter from Tom Raley to Jacky Everett,” August 21, 1973, Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁷⁸ Robert Murray, “Reaching Up and Out” (Camp Cherith, 1978), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁷⁹ “Orientation”; “Head Girls Counselor” (Young Life, n.d.), Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁸⁰ Murray, “My Morning Watch”; “Echoes 1952.”

¹⁸¹ Barbara Priddy, “Letter from Barbara Priddy to Frontier Camp Group,” October 14, 1964, Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁸² Johnson, “Letter from Orien Johnson,” n.d.

(likely fictional) camper: “I wish we had camp all the year ’round. But sometimes I guess it’s good to stand for the Lord when there when there aren’t just Christians around.”¹⁸³

The practice of nostalgia, it should be clear, did not end with the conclusion of camp. After all, in the words of Young Life camper Betsy in a post-camp letter, “It takes months for everything to sink in.”¹⁸⁴ Campers were encouraged to think back on their time at camp throughout the school year, which served both to anchor their religious experience in a past all-Christian society and to get them excited to attend camp again and perpetuate the program. Although the wrap-up to camp was often forward-looking—emphasizing bringing the lessons of camp back into the world—that attitude took on an inevitably critical-nostalgic cast. In her letter to Raley, Everett wrote, “if I really want to grow in Christ I musn’t [*sic*] dwell on the time I spent there” but look forward instead.¹⁸⁵ But while *dwelling* on time at camp may not have been recommended, referring back to it and longing for it were part of the process, one in which Everett herself clearly engaged.

Thanks to the sheer amount of archival material available, this longing is especially clear in the Pioneer Girls organization. In a typical year, at least two of every four quarterly newsletters to young participants made reference to Camp Cherith, and many of these mentions explicitly encouraged girls to remember their time there and get excited for next year. Even one of Cherith’s official camp songs—which was sung *at* camp, not after—prepared girls to be nostalgic for camp: “Memories of camp we’ll cherish / Everywhere we roam,” campers sang, “Looking toward that glad reunion / In our heavenly Home.”¹⁸⁶ These words can be interpreted

¹⁸³ “Judy,” “Cherith Memories...,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1953, 4, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁸⁴ Betsy, “Letter from Betsy to Barbara Priddy,” n.d., Accession 16-19 Papers of Barbara Cecil Priddy, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸⁵ Everett to Raley, “Letter from Jacky Everett to Tom Raley,” August 4, 1973.

¹⁸⁶ *Pioneer Girls Trail Book*, 158.

in multiple ways: either girls would be nostalgic for camp throughout their lives until they died and went to heaven, this teaching girls to satiate themselves and their camp experiences on a longer timeline, or the reunion would happen next year at Camp Cherith, a heavenly home thanks to its being set aside from worldly concerns. Perhaps the double meaning is intentional, and both interpretations are correct.

Inculcating a nostalgia for camp was part and parcel of adult organizers' goals to create the next generation of evangelical Christianity. First, campers learned the joys of an all-Christian society of the type found in various pasts (American, biblical), which would build their enthusiasm for bringing back such a society, gender roles included, into the present. Then, once that nostalgia was established, campers were taught to be nostalgic for camp itself, which would both feed into the greater nostalgia and maintain their excitement into the next year's enrollment period, thus maintaining the centrality of summer camp to American evangelical children and teenagers' experience throughout the year. Now, from the isolated environment of summer camp, I turn to the ways nostalgia was employed to teach girls how to be Christian in their day-to-day lives with a closer look at the Pioneer Girls.

Chapter 2: Whiteness, Nostalgia, and the Pioneer Girls

“A girl is a marvelous thing!” reads a 1977 pamphlet promoting the Pioneer Girls. “She’s a bundle of right-now enrichment for all those whose lives she touches. She’s a challenge. She’s a wonder. She’s pain and disappointment. But most of all—she’s God’s creation.”¹⁸⁷ These were merely some of the characteristics of girlhood that the organization promoted over the years. Throughout the history of the Pioneer Girls, participants were characterized as outdoorsy, independent, and full of Christian potential. They were taught to look toward the future and also taught not to rush toward womanhood, a future identity with different characteristics. They were also, implicitly, understood as American and white. The meaning of this girlhood was nostalgic, and not because of girls’ age status placing them in some ways permanently in the past: drawing on the figure of the pioneer, numerous materials emphasized the importance of feminine self-reliance (while also underscoring the whiteness of their presumed audience).

As is the case throughout this work, the archive I draw on here consists primarily of materials written by adults. When girls’ own voices do appear, they are largely in the context of letters written to publications primarily written and edited by those adults. While these voices are important, they are not likely to provide much of a glimpse at the points where girls’ own views and experiences may have diverged from the goals of the organization. It is thus important to keep in mind that while I attempt to use the Pioneer Girls organization to explore what an ideal girlhood may have looked like for midcentury white evangelicals, as well as the messages being given directly to those girls, the full scope of ways in which they received those messages remains inaccessible.

¹⁸⁷ “What Your Church Can Do for Girls” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., ca 1977), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 8, folder 1, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

Pioneer Girls began in 1939 as an American evangelical ministry for girls that bore more than a passing resemblance to the Girl Scouts. The organization aimed to bring girls to Christ through a combination of games, badge activities, witnessing, and Bible study. In doing so, at least through its 1981 transformation into the now-coed Pioneer Clubs, it employed nostalgia for a notably white American past in order to model an ideal evangelical girlhood of the present. Through Pioneer Girls' expansions into mission fields, less-white city-based ministries, and other nods to diversity, the organization, like other high-profile evangelical groups, remained an Ahmedian white space.¹⁸⁸

Though the Pioneer Girls organization was not as large as other, coed organizations, it was the only evangelical parachurch organization of the Cold War period to focus exclusively on girls.¹⁸⁹ And its numbers were still nothing to sneeze at: The coed Young Life claimed more than 70,000 members by 1977, but despite being limited to a single gender, Pioneer Girls represented nearly 60,000 in 1976. (This came after Youth for Christ's Billy Graham-led heyday in the 1940s and 1950s, when a single rally could attract tens of thousands of young participants.) Thanks to its focus on girls, Pioneer Girls materials crystallize views of girlhood within the broader (neo-) evangelical movement as it gained cultural influence, filling out the girlhood ideology found within other parachurch groups. This ideology posited that though they should be aware of the characteristics and duties of the women they would one day become, evangelical girls at this time were treated as a separate category. That separate category said that evangelical girls should be independent and capable, with an enthusiasm for evangelism and an individual emotional connection to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Ministries used different forms of critical

¹⁸⁸ Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness."

¹⁸⁹ Larsen, "Pioneer Girls"; Bruce L. (Bruce Leon) Shelley, "The Rise of Evangelical Youth Movements," *Fides et Historia* 18, no. 1 (January 1986): 45–63.

nostalgia to teach these traits as part of their larger projects, and for Pioneer Girls, ideal Christian girlhood *was* that project.

Despite its deliberately more limited participant base, the organization was nevertheless an important part of the larger ecosystem of Cold War-era nondenominational evangelical youth movements: it was started by undergraduates at the evangelical Wheaton College, and it received a chunk of its funding from the Christian Worker's Foundation, which funded at least five other such youth organizations, including Young Life and Youth for Christ.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, Pioneer Girls was a homosocial environment, making it possible not only for the organization itself to focus exclusively on girls, but also for girls to focus more on each other and on the meaning of girlhood specifically within their religious milieu.

The use of the pioneer and other titles ascribed to white people spreading across the North American continent was not only deliberate, but regularly pointed out in Pioneer Girls materials, which gave girls different such titles based on their age group. "Pilgrims," one 1963 handbook for younger girls says, "are people going somewhere!"¹⁹¹ Meanwhile, a handbook for middle-schoolers from the same year notes that colonists were former "voyagers from the old world" who established themselves in towns "where they could freely worship God."¹⁹² Here, the early United States was imagined not only as an unoccupied wilderness but also as a Christian nation, in opposition to unspecified other places where free Christian worship was not possible. This latter idea was becoming an important one among American Protestants, including and especially those in the halls of power, around the same time as the Pioneer Girls experienced its biggest growth.¹⁹³ While the Pioneer Girls' "free worship" clearly nods to the myth of the

¹⁹⁰ Larsen, "Pioneer Girls."

¹⁹¹ Pioneer Girls, *Pilgrim Log Book*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, IL, 1963), 5.

¹⁹² Pioneer Girls, *Colonist Trail Book*, 12th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1963), 11.

¹⁹³ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Kerby, *Saving History*; Kruse, *One Nation Under God*.

Plymouth Rock pilgrims' inability to worship in England, and the contemporary threat to free worship was imagined as the Communist bloc, the implication was that Americans have always had to practice some form of Manifest Destiny-style expansion in order to practice Christianity in the land they occupy.

All of this took place under the "Pioneer" umbrella, and though age group names have changed through the organization's history, the pioneers have remained. In Pioneer Girls' first several decades, the American pioneer was foregrounded, with covered wagons decorating everything from handbooks to fundraising events. Individual clubs were called "fortalices," which one handbook explains was "a small fortification built out of stout logs," constructed "to protect the people from the Indians."¹⁹⁴ In so clearly linking ideal evangelical girlhood to white settler colonialists of the American past, Pioneer Girls invited participants to relive the history of Manifest Destiny as a critical-nostalgic practice while, without using so many words, marking the clubs as ideally white. By looking at how the Pioneer Girls made use of the past, it is possible to discover how the organization used nostalgia to situate girls in an evangelical historical imaginary, and what that might mean for girls in other corners of evangelical America.

This chapter is not a straightforward history of the Pioneer Girls. Rather, I intend to portray a few themes that remained consistent through the organization's first several decades, in spite of developments in the U.S. around issues like civil rights and women's liberation. While things changed superficially for the organization—badges for learning about ethnic heritage, increased emphasis on getting a job as an option to explore for the future—it retained a focus on white American westward expansion and on the eternal pastness of the category of girl. That is

¹⁹⁴ Pioneer Girls, *Colonist Trail Book*, 11.

to say, regardless of time passing and the environment changing, the nostalgic pedagogy remained the same.

American Pioneers

The Pioneer Girls were part of the explosion in evangelical activity that started in the 1930s and picked up with the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942. As parachurch organizations and ministries unaffiliated with any particular denomination flourished, children and youth became a major focus. The evangelical book industry began identifying this group as a potential market, revivalist projects like Youth for Christ gave teenagers an opportunity to be “in the world,” and youth-focused organizations such as Young Life, the Child Evangelism Fellowship, and the Pioneer Girls started giving kids an opportunity to participate in Christian activities outside of Sunday School.¹⁹⁵

Founded in Wheaton, Illinois, as the Girls Guild in 1939 (the name would change two years later), Pioneer Girls began not as an alternative to the already-popular Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls, but as a complement to the all-boys Christian Service Brigade, which had begun in 1937.¹⁹⁶ In the Pioneer Girls’ first constitution, representatives of the Christian Service Brigade’s board of directors were included on the Pioneer Girls’ own board, a stipulation that appeared on and off through the latter organization’s first few decades.¹⁹⁷ Each club was sponsored by a local church, and groups were sponsored by all variety of denominations in a reflection of the new evangelical strategy that downplayed denominational affiliation in favor of

¹⁹⁵ For more on this history, see Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

¹⁹⁶ “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1964), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 9, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

¹⁹⁷ “Constitution of Pioneer Girls,” 1943, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 1, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Revised Constitution of Pioneer Girls,” 1956, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 1, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Constitution & Bylaws of Pioneer Girls, Inc.,” May 1968, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 1, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College. Pioneer Girls fortalices would also on occasion hold events with their sibling CSB “battalions.”

developing a shared identity based on other factors.¹⁹⁸ Still, despite Pioneer Girls' official ecumenical stance, most groups met in Baptist churches, signaling the continued utility of an existing denominational structure within the larger evangelical movement.¹⁹⁹ Growing from a network of clubs centered on Chicago, Pioneer Girls launched as a national organization in 1943, along with its various Camps Cherith. The organization kept growing through the next several decades, even introducing boys' clubs in 1980 and rebranding as the now-coed Pioneer Clubs shortly thereafter.²⁰⁰

In its first two years as the Girls Guild, the organization used more fairy tale-like motifs. The three ranks girls could achieve were Maiden, Lady, and Princess, and included requirements such as a Royal Courtesy Test and a Posture Drill.²⁰¹ In 1941, a new head of the organization rewrote the guidebook, keeping the goal ("That we may glorify Him"), basic three-rank structure, and some of the badges (Nature and Music), while overhauling the theme. Although I could find no archival sources on why this change was made, the change in theme did bring the Pioneer Girls more in line with the motifs used by other, more purportedly secular girls' clubs of the era.

Although inspired by the Christian Service Brigade, the Pioneer Girls bore more than a passing resemblance to two more famous organizations, the Camp Fire Girls and the Girl Scouts. Like these groups, Pioneer Girls met in smaller groups under the purview of regional and national councils. Participants earned badges and moved up in rank by completing tasks—although only Pioneer Girls were required to memorize Bible verses. Badges themselves were

¹⁹⁸ Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*.

¹⁹⁹ Larsen, "Pioneer Girls."

²⁰⁰ "Leader Orientation for Boys Club Pilot Project" (Pioneer Ministries, 1980), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 3, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; Pioneer Clubs, "The History of Pioneer Clubs."

²⁰¹ "Guidebook for Girls: Silver Anniversary Pioneer Girls" (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1964), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 15, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

often similar, with both Girl Scouts and Pioneer Girls able to earn accolades for activities from sewing to hiking, though even within these similar badge categories Pioneer Girls would often add requirements such as reading a Bible verse and explaining how it pertained to the badge activities.²⁰²

In the interwar years prior to the founding of the Pioneer Girls, the Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls participated actively in the project of “Americanizing” immigrants, using the daughters of immigrant families as a vector.²⁰³ Although the Camp Fire Girls and Girl Scouts were backing off from this project by the time the Pioneer Girls came around, their tactics and theories of Americanization are instructive when considering the ways the Pioneer Girls both aimed to Christianize participants and linked that Christianity to (white) Americanness itself. Such linking of identity has been a common thread throughout modern American evangelicalism from the Cold War through the present, creating a powerful religious nationalism that begins in childhood and gets transmitted generationally. This generational transmission even occurred between participants in the Pioneer Girls: one handbook explains, “The top rank in Pilgrims is Townsman, where a girl learns to lead and help younger ones who do not know the way.”²⁰⁴

The Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls linked their project of Americanizing, as Leslie Hahner has proposed, to what was known as the “girl problem”: the idea that girls who were sent to work without early training in wholesome American values were prone to rebelling against their strict parents and engaging in the perils of petty theft and premarital sex.²⁰⁵ The Pioneer Girls came onto the scene toward the end of the heyday of this particular Americanizing project,

²⁰² *Pioneer Girls Trail Book*.

²⁰³ Leslie Hahner, “Practical Patriotism: Camp Fire Girls, Girl Scouts, and Americanization,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 2008): 113–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420801989702>.

²⁰⁴ *Pioneer Girls, Pilgrim Log Book*, 17.

²⁰⁵ Hahner, “Practical Patriotism.”

but it, too, engaged the girl problem. “One dominant concern,” reads a twenty-fifth anniversary pamphlet, from 1964, “was for unsaved girls, among them the pre-delinquent girls of the war years who were getting into trouble, defying authority and restlessly experimenting for dangerous thrills.”²⁰⁶ For the Pioneer Girls, the project wasn’t necessarily to Americanize immigrant girls, but to Christianize at-risk ones, using similar strategies and to the same basic ends. Importantly, at least early on, the organization seems to have been entirely focused on white, middle-class girls—those who may already have been considered all-American. A 1944 newsletter suggests that “two new fortalices for colored girls will be started in Wheaton very soon,” but evidence for any nonwhite groups (or even individual nonwhite campers) remains sketchy for the organization’s early years.²⁰⁷ As far as such groups go, greater focus was put on groups abroad, as missionaries brought proper (white, American, Protestant) Christianity to girls in faraway lands. The strategies the organization used in these cases are remarkably similar to those used by its secular counterparts: one missionary in 1954 in the then-territory of Hawaii, for instance, hoped that participants would bring lessons learned with Pioneer Girls home to their families, who are described as still practicing their indigenous religion.²⁰⁸

The Americanization project of the Camp Fire Girls and Girl Scouts rested on two primary strategies: training in “patriotic rituals” and instruction in proper domesticity.²⁰⁹ Together, this public performance and private lifestyle would combine to create upstanding American girls. The Pioneer Girls would use a similar approach, instructing in both Christianity and more secular pursuits (early badges included Culinary Arts, First Aid, and, literally, All-

²⁰⁶ “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary.”

²⁰⁷ “News Flash!,” *Town Crier*, March 15, 1944, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 7, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁰⁸ “Camp Cherith in Hawaii.”

²⁰⁹ Hahner, “Practical Patriotism,” 127.

American²¹⁰) to form wholesome Christian girls whose Christianity and Americanness informed each other. For evangelicals during the Cold War that was coeval with much of the Pioneer Girls' history, it was common thinking that responsible choices made someone both a good Christian and a good American, and that childhood and adolescence were an opportune time to solidify these links. Sara Moslener has even argued that the new focus on these age groups was key to the nascent Christian nationalism: "The mix of adolescent revivalism and patriotic religiosity," she writes, "proved to be a potent formula for fundamentalist renaissance."²¹¹ Sometimes this patriotism revealed itself in surprising ways, as in a daily schedule for Camp Cherith that marks off 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. for "studies from the Book the Presidents have preferred—the Bible."²¹² This was most obvious, however, not necessarily in the list of merit badges but in the idea of the pioneer, which further linked Christianity and Americanness to whiteness and an idealized past.

Numerous scholars, including Sara Moslener, Ann Stoler, and Amy Kaplan, have written about the ways in which women acted as important agents of white American westward expansion.²¹³ Here, Manifest Destiny represented an opportunity for white families to "domesticate" Native peoples just as white mothers domesticated wild children. In this reading, white women were the key to settling and Christianizing—Americanizing—the frontier that would eventually become part of the United States, providing a useful historical narrative to teach Pioneer Girls participants to embody through nostalgic practice. Meanwhile, the purity of

²¹⁰ "Badge Packet" (Pioneer Girls, December 1943), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 3, folder 29, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²¹¹ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 54.

²¹² Pioneer Girls, *Cherith Chips*, 3.

²¹³ Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 581–606, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902710>; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 829–65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700385>.

white girls in this same period was directly tied to the moral purity of the growing nation—an idea that, as Moslener argues, tends to become prominent in times of cultural crisis (as perceived by evangelicals). This includes the Cold War era during which Pioneer Girls grew from a small collection of local clubs into an international, and eventually coed, organization.

It is these emphases on gender and space that I wish to apply to the Pioneer Girls' model of ideal evangelical girlhood. Ahmed argues that even if a space is not explicitly restricted to white people, it may still be felt as a white-coded space if it contains an ambient whiteness, especially as conveyed in assumptions about the space's inhabitants.²¹⁴ In this way, Pioneer Girls was, in its first thirty-plus years, not only a space for training girls to be good practitioners of a particular nostalgic evangelical femininity, but also a space that, through allusions to an explicitly white past that in truth subjugated others, assumed that femininity to be white.

The Pioneer Girls were part of a long evangelical tradition of associating Christianity with white-Americanness. Arising around the same time as the push from white evangelical business leaders to promote ideals such as “one nation under God,” they used both explicit pedagogy and historical symbolism to train participants simultaneously in appropriate Christian girlhood and American patriotism.²¹⁵ By referring back to figures such as the pioneers, the organization taught girls to redeem the nation by following a nostalgia-inflected model of Christian girlhood and spreading the Gospel. Lauren Kerby has argued that white evangelicals have “embraced history as a solution to contemporary crises” since the 1970s.²¹⁶ The Pioneer Girls show that this tendency dates to at least three decades earlier.

²¹⁴ Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness.”

²¹⁵ Kruse, *One Nation Under God*; Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Kevin Michael Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²¹⁶ Kerby, *Saving History*, 108.

In her work on Christian homeschoolers, Elizabeth Shivley remarks that the figure of the pioneer represents “the days when Christian values were the values of many public institutions,” and in the face of the godless Communist threat, this was one matter in which pioneers may have been particularly appealing.²¹⁷ Indeed, the Pioneer Girls organization was occasionally explicit in its allegiance to the U.S. government, as with the guidebook that notes the Bible as the favorite book of presidents, or a Communism badge that entailed reading J. Edgar Hoover’s book.²¹⁸ At the same time as it explicitly presented Christianity and Americanness as going hand in hand, the organization implicitly added whiteness to the mix. This most obviously entailed lionizing white historical figures imagined as spreading Christianity across a wild and empty continent, a historiographical idea recapitulated as critical nostalgia in the camping and hiking activities that the organization specifically presented as part of normal American girlhood. In this way, whiteness, Christianity, girlhood, and the well-being of the American nation were all associated with each other, becoming not only linked but in some ways co-constitutive.

Embodied History as Critical Nostalgia

To (implicitly) promote its white girlhood ideal, the Pioneer Girls characterized participants as characters from American history—colonists, pilgrims, and, of course, pioneers—to bring that idealized past into the present. This was part of a bigger project within American evangelicalism. Like the contemporary white evangelicals Kerby has studied, those at the beginning of the neo-evangelical movement saw “history as the key to America’s salvation.”²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Elizabeth Shivley, “Patriot Boys and Pioneer Girls: Christian Homeschool Texts, Gender, and the American Rural Idyll,” in *Visual Encounters in the Study of Rural Childhoods*, ed. April Mandrona and Claudia Mitchell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 78.

²¹⁸ Pioneer Girls, *Cherith Chips*, 3; “Colonist/Explorer Badge Supplement” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., n.d.), 8, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 5, folder 5, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²¹⁹ Kerby, *Saving History*, 6.

The way that national salvation has been alleged to work, both then and now, is through a critical-nostalgic approach of restoring desired aspects of the past through practices associated with it. I differ from Kerby, however, in shining a light not on historical narrative but on historical archetypes and nostalgic practice. Whereas the evangelicals in Kerby's book "do history," the Pioneer Girls embodied it. In this case, for white evangelicals, becoming pioneers could restore the United States to its God-given purpose: "Christians running a Christian nation."²²⁰

Old West themes were a major part of popular culture throughout the Pioneer Girls' heyday, particularly children's culture; *Davy Crockett* ran on ABC from 1954 to 1955, and *Little House on the Prairie* premiered in 1974, bookending the organization's peak years. With the Pioneer Girls, white evangelicals took an already-popular figure from popular culture and emphasized her religious characteristics, highlighting not only the pioneer's rugged self-reliance but also her righteous Christian beliefs. The success of the pioneers, and their central place in white American culture, was here chalked up to the Christian faith that, in this narrative, motivated their whole journey. The actual pioneer girl, then, was the ideal figure for a Christian girl to emulate as evangelicalism moved toward its glorious future.

Kerby has argued that evangelicals employ both "insider history" and "outsider history" depending on the needs of any given argument, with the former characterizing the United States as necessarily Christian and the latter characterizing white evangelicals as a righteous oppressed minority. The pioneers and pilgrims of the Pioneer Girls referred to the former, embodying a nostalgic narrative in which the nation's founders were blessed by God. By imagining themselves as these figures, participants could bring these blessings into the present. Here lay the

²²⁰ Kerby, 6.

significance of Manifest Destiny, the nineteenth-century idea that white, Christian Americans were divinely destined to spread their way of life via westward expansion. Though the term itself does not appear in any materials I examined, its meaning drove the organization: although the period of westward expansion was over, the Pioneer Girls could refer back to the nationalist idea of populating and thereby Christianizing a continent as the organization pursued its goals of creating Christian girls and teaching them to spread the gospel, whether the location of that evangelizing be their own suburban schools or unchurched communities in the Global South.

The organization encouraged these gospel-spreading relationships not only between girls and their peers or mission sites (which were sometimes one and the same), but also between generations. This included relationships between participants and their adult leaders (who should, according to one pamphlet, be “women of God”), between “generations” of active girl participants, and mentoring relationships arranged between girls and adult women church members through the organization’s Pals program.²²¹ These relationships situated girls in time, promising them a link to the past on which they could model themselves while promising adults a chance to participate, by sharing their wisdom, in nostalgia for their own girlhoods and the creation of an improved future. While not as obviously nostalgia-centric (nor as whiteness-promoting) as the settler-colonialist eras longed for elsewhere, these relationships nevertheless promoted the use of an idealized (white, middle-class) past to create a particular future. It just happens that rather than the past of the nineteenth century, this past was a time still within reach.

The nostalgia inherent in the Pioneer Girls project also appeared in its inculcation of longing for an American past that was more morally upstanding. A 1964 anniversary pamphlet distributed for fundraising purposes made the claim that programs like the Pioneer Girls were

²²¹ “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary.”

necessary because moral standards in the present were lower than they were even when the organization was founded, let alone the era of the actual (lowercase) pioneer girls themselves.²²² Throughout the period addressed here, in fact, materials point to the recent past as something to emulate, even as materials from those pasts in turn point to even earlier periods as objects of nostalgia. Even though this particular pamphlet says elsewhere that the group was founded specifically to help morally at-risk youth, it is the nostalgia for a more virtuous past that comes through the clearest. And unlike white settlers of the nineteenth century, this past could be accessed with the kind of intergenerational relationships that were part of the Pioneer Girls brand.

The idea of a more moral, perhaps safer, past is, of course, one that has existed for a long time, the past being searched for forever out of reach. That past, as is obvious for a program with a name like Pioneer Girls, may be a certain historical period. However, it may also be a particular moment in a person's life, and that is also the case here. Girlhood studies scholars have long argued that, from the point of view of adults and particularly grown women, girlhood represents a time of freedom and self-confidence that is past, whose particular traits may be worth reaching back in time and reclaiming.²²³ This perception of girlhood is reflected in materials directed at Pioneer Girls leaders and donors, especially guides explaining the traits of each age group the organization served.

Girlhood/Womanhood

Looking at the Pioneer Girls, it is easy to see not one but three distinct evangelical girlhoods. For its first 35 years, Pioneer Girls divided participants into three age-based groups:

²²² "Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary."

²²³ Driscoll, *Girls*.

Pilgrims (third, and later second, through sixth grade), Colonists (seventh through ninth grade), and Explorers (tenth through twelfth grade). Girls could move up through ranks within their age groups by earning activity badges and memorizing Bible verses; for instance, within the Pilgrims group a girl would start as a Voyager but, with enough engagement in the program, could earn the ranks of Settler and finally Townsman. Ascension through the ranks marked not only age and emotional/religious maturity, but also proximity to Christian womanhood—an altogether different form of femininity, and one that became gradually emphasized the older a Pioneer Girl became. Indeed, the ranks themselves, in this period, marked progress through history, with Colonists following Pilgrims and Explorers representing the nascent Space Age and the modern day.²²⁴ As their ranks moved from past to present, then, so did girls themselves move in the eyes of their authority figures from past girlhood to present womanhood.

In 1974, the three groups were divided into five and the Pilgrim and Colonist monikers dropped, though the reasons given are not clear. Though the new categories did not reflect a chronological history (discussed later in this chapter), the idea of three distinct stages of girlhood roughly divided into elementary, middle, and high school remained and new forms of critical nostalgia arose to accompany the pioneer nostalgia at the core of the organization. Various materials for group leaders and potential donors throughout the Pioneer Girls' history were consistent in explaining the differences among the groups, sometimes conceiving them as characters, like sisters.²²⁵ These subdivisions noted everything from bodily changes and development of fine motor skills to hobbies and interests to spiritual proclivities. In these charts and narratives, it becomes clear that the youngest girls were understood as the most fun and also most open to Christianity, and that the oldest were, almost universally, properly prepared for

²²⁴ Pioneer Girls, *Explorer Chart Book*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1960), 8.

²²⁵ Pioneer Girls, *Guiding Girls* (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1960).

Christian womanhood. Middle-school girls around the age of puberty whose gender was in flux, from girl to woman, were the group who were said to pose the most problems.²²⁶ In one 1964 pamphlet, Pilgrims are described as perhaps simplistic but also “profound” and “trusting.” In fact, the author notes, “more decisions for Christ are made in Pilgrim years than any other age.” An archetypal Explorer, meanwhile, while susceptible to peer pressure, was also interested in “prob[ing] the taunting questions that harass her mind.” On the other hand, Colonists are characterized as difficult first and foremost: “unpredictable,” “harder to reach,” and “a more strategic target of all our efforts.”²²⁷

Setting aside the mild insult to middle-school girls, this breakdown shows the ways that Pioneer Girls understood individuals gendered feminine, a tendency that persisted past the use of Pilgrim and Colonist identifiers. Indeed, the wary attitude toward middle-schoolers is part and parcel of the girl/woman duality, as what made these girls difficult was their liminal place in between girlhood and womanhood, while not quite successfully pulling off either. While going through physical changes has been troubling for girls experiencing puberty throughout history, it is the changing treatment of these girls based on whether their femininity was coded as childlike or mature that I am interested in here.²²⁸ While one of the aims of the Pioneer Girls program was to “lead girls into maturity in Christ,” it is clear that girls were not understood as merely future women—indeed, they seem to have been understood as a different type of person altogether.²²⁹ It is possible that the youngest girls in the program were less gendered on the whole: a 1980 guide for adapting materials to boys’ groups for a pilot program notes that “the fewest adaptations will

²²⁶ See Pioneer Girls, *The Pioneer Girls Guide: Basic Manual for Leaders*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1969); “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary.”

²²⁷ “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary.”

²²⁸ For a discussion of the various angsts puberty thrusts on girls, see Brumberg, *The Body Project*.

²²⁹ “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary.”

be made in grades one through four,” but that as “girls mature faster” changes would be increasingly necessary by early adolescence.²³⁰

The decoupling of girlhood from womanhood is not uncommon in the world of American childhood and adolescence. Scholars in girlhood studies have long noted that girls are perceived as having different privileges, characteristics, and expectations than the adult women they will one day become.²³¹ This tendency was evident in the Pioneer Girls with, as always, a nod to the organization’s religious aims. While building girls into women, the Pioneer Girls nevertheless aimed to preserve certain characteristics of girlhood, making girlhood itself a site of critical nostalgia for both leaders and participants. Here, that might mean not only the adventurousness of the girlhoods in the white American middle class, but also the specific spiritual openness ascribed to young Christian girls. This is a different form of nostalgia: not just for a past America, but for a past self.

Guides for leaders throughout the history addressed here urged readers to remember their own girlhoods and use that to relate to their charges, a practice that extended beyond the Pioneer Girls and its peak years.²³² These materials also highlighted the differences between girls “then” and “now”: girls then were perhaps more innocent, less privileged, living less fast-paced lives than they were now. In these cases, “then” referred to the era of leaders’ own girlhoods, although its Christian characteristics dovetail with the “then” of the pioneer American past. Guides claimed that it was more difficult now (whenever now may be) to lead a good Christian life, and that drawing on the past for inspiration could help girls live such a life in the present. One guide

²³⁰ “Leader Orientation for Boys Club Pilot Project.”

²³¹ See Driscoll, *Girls*; Gonick, *Between Femininities*; Ward and Benjamin, “Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls’ Studies.”

²³² “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary”; Pioneer Girls, *Pioneer Girls Guide*; Warwick and Graham, “A Profile of Today’s Girl.”

for leaders from 1969 touted quiet (for “know[ing] God is near”), security, and discipline as virtues otherwise relegated to leaders’ own girlhoods that they should draw on when guiding their charges, who were characterized as having too much freedom and few “roots in the past.”²³³ Keep in mind: leaders’ own girlhoods in 1969 may not have been long before, and may even have occurred during, the Pioneer Girls’ founding years—years during which organizational leadership nevertheless longed for a past time when Jesus was less “obscured” by modern life.²³⁴

The past was thus always understood to be a better environment for spiritual development than the present, and a good model to emulate for creating the future. It is perhaps useful to think of these pasts—westward expansion, interwar America, girlhood itself—as a singular Eden, unreachable because of subsequent sin, but an ideal nevertheless to be constantly longed for. Unlike Eden, however, these pasts were also conceptualized as able to be brought back in some ways through practice. It is important to note that these ideal pasts are likely to have been understood as white and middle-class. Early Pioneer Girls fortalices were entirely white, as was organizational leadership at least through 1974 (and likely later), and although it is difficult to ascertain the racial makeup of participants in later years, the archival materials I found tend to assume their readers are white.²³⁵ This tracks with both the purportedly multiracial white space of the Billy Graham strain of evangelicalism of which the Pioneer Girls were a part, as well as with the whiteness commonly underscoring the pop-cultural norm of what it meant to be an American girl both within and outside of evangelicalism.²³⁶

²³³ Pioneer Girls, *Pioneer Girls Guide*, 15–16.

²³⁴ “Christ in Every Phase of a Girl’s Life” (Pioneer Girls, 1942), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 7, folder 21, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²³⁵ “News Flash!”; “35th Anniversary.”

²³⁶ Hahner, “Practical Patriotism”; Hains, *Growing up with Girl Power*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Simmons, *Crescent City Girls*; Ward and Benjamin, “Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls’ Studies.”

Pioneer Girls' aim to protect certain aspects of (white) girlhood innocence, even as participants progressed through adolescence, is a more all-encompassing version of the evangelical preoccupation with sexual purity among adolescents, which, as Sara Moslener has argued, tends to intensify at particularly apocalyptic points in American history. The Cold War period, with its "dual threats of nuclear attack and moral decay," was one of those peaks.²³⁷ Due to their positionality in time, as representative of both an idealized past and a hopeful future, and their gender positionality, as both more innocent and more responsible than their masculine counterparts, girls in this period were seen as central to the moral progress of American civilization, even if it was men who, in their natural capacity as leaders, were in charge.

The perceived need to safeguard girls also drew on cultural themes of girlhood greater than the Cold War-era evangelical movement. Another broadly studied aspect of girlhood is the tendency of often-hypothetical girls to be sorted into two buckets, which Anita Harris has termed "can-do" and "at-risk."²³⁸ The latter are figures of serious concern both for the well-being of those around them and for the future of society; they can only be transformed into the former through hard work and good choices. Although Harris characterizes these categories as a recent phenomenon, historians have shown that concern for at-risk girls has a long history dating at least to the dawn of adolescence as a category in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³⁹ These concerns have often been tied in with Protestant missionizing efforts, and during the Cold War, Pioneer Girls was not even the only Christian organization aiming to

²³⁷ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 75.

²³⁸ Harris, *Future Girl*. Other scholars working with this binary include Driscoll, *Girls*; Gonick, *Between Femininities*.

²³⁹ See Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*.

transform at-risk girls into can-do ones using the power of Christ (and of adult-supervised alternatives to fearsome adolescent activities).²⁴⁰

The kind of girlhood the Pioneer Girls promoted tracked closely with the girlhoods promoted by the Girl Scouts: while groups participated in plenty of typically feminine pursuits—one Pioneer Girls newsletter from 1948 covers three different tea parties in as many states—the organization largely encouraged outdoorsy activities such as camping and hiking.²⁴¹ The Girl Scouts similarly promoted the idea that outdoorsiness and self-sufficiency were important characteristics for any normal American girl.²⁴² Pioneer Girls was interested in this kind of normality—just infused with evangelical teachings.

Playing the Pioneer Role

In a 1950 Pioneer Girls handbook for girls, the organization acknowledged its own nostalgia, remarking, “Perhaps you have been wondering where the name ‘Pioneer Girls’ came from, and why it is used in an organization that is up to date, since the word pioneer makes one think of days gone by.”²⁴³ The answer, the book says, is that a pioneer is actually someone who “goes before to prepare the way for another.” The parallel to Matthew 3:3 is not stated but merely implied: by preparing the way for others, participants prepared the way of the Lord. The book also draws explicit parallels between the Pioneer Girls and the pioneers of American history, using “pioneer” expansively to include everyone from pilgrims (“the first comers to these shores”)²⁴⁴ to colonists and finally the covered-wagon pioneers who dominated the Pioneer

²⁴⁰ E.g., Youth for Christ; see Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

²⁴¹ “Valentine Tea in Augusta,” *Hitchin’ Post*, April 1948, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 17, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Texas Tea Party,” *Hitchin’ Post*, April 1948, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 17, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Untitled,” *Hitchin’ Post*, April 1948, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 17, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁴² Hahner, “Practical Patriotism”; Putney, *Muscular Christianity*.

²⁴³ Pioneer Girls, *Explorer Chart Book*, 6.

²⁴⁴ Pioneer Girls, 7.

Girls imaginary. Pioneers were an obvious theme in the early decades of the organization, though by the 1970s the specific figure of the pioneer began moving to the background aesthetically and discursively, in line with the waning popularity of the Old West in popular culture. Nevertheless, nostalgia for times past persisted, and white girls continued to be centered as a normative ideal. The organization did, after all, retain the Pioneer Girls name.

In those early years, though, pioneers themselves loomed large in the organizational imaginary, providing examples of an idealized Christian America that could be brought back into a world threatened by godless communism, and of the kind of rugged self-reliance the organization promoted as good for both girls and Christians, and of the capacity for both these qualities to be transmitted generationally. Among other places, this generationalism appeared prominently during National Pioneer Girls Week, an annual celebration of all things Pioneer Girls. Each day of Pioneer Girls Week, clubs were given a theme such as Uniform Day or Father-Daughter Night, with activity suggestions such as “games from Pioneer days.”²⁴⁵ These themed days led up to Pioneer Girls Sunday, when groups would put on presentations for their sponsoring churches. An early National Pioneer Girls Week guide from 1946 offers a skit for girls to perform for the congregation involving a grandmother reminiscing about the “wonderful days” of her childhood traveling west in a covered wagon. She talks about members of her wagon train protecting themselves from war-painted Indians and singing songs around a campfire (the songs were all, of course, hymns). In a bit of cyclical history, the script’s second scene features the little girl as a grandmother herself—and her granddaughter explaining her Pioneer Girls activities, which sound suspiciously similar to the original grandmother’s covered-wagon tales.

²⁴⁵ Pioneer Girls, “National Pioneer Girls Week,” 1946, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 15, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

The pioneer motif also appeared in smaller ways such as covered-wagon decorations at Pioneer Girls dinners and promotional wagon-themed window dressing at church.²⁴⁶ These decorations were put to use at the Old West-themed parties that fortalices sometimes held: one 1949 party featured both a gold rush game and an “Indian blanket race.”²⁴⁷ Pioneers were also employed pedagogically, as when one Chicago fortalice put on demonstrations of pioneer activities such as “outdoor cooking, trail laying and the Catch-Up formations” for their host church in 1953.²⁴⁸ In 1958, the *Hitchin’ Post* newsletter even held a contest to publish the best covered-wagon design; a Pilgrim group in Elgin, Ill., won with a design for tabletop covered-wagon decorations made of candy, neatly tying together pioneers and 1950s dinner-party femininity.²⁴⁹ Here, pioneers are easy to write off as a mere themed overlay for fun youth group activities. However, the persistence of that theme, and its use in promoting the organization to local churches, shows a deeper significance. Pioneers, more than being a zeitgeisty way to play pretend, were a symbol of the kind of past wholesomeness participants could be expected to embody, and that symbol worked both internally and in more outward-facing promotional arenas.

At Pioneer Girls summer camps (all called Camp Cherith), the themes of outdoorsiness and self-reliance truly came to the fore, evoked by the rustic setting. The Pioneer Girls organization held summer camps from the beginning; the first Camp Cherith was established in 1941 in Volo, Illinois, 55 miles north of Chicago. Pioneers themselves do not appear to have

²⁴⁶ “Wagon Trail Display,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1954, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁴⁷ Joan Pioneer Girls, “Westward Ho!,” *Hitchin’ Post*, May 1949, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 17, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁴⁸ “Pretend Pioneers,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1953, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁴⁹ “Contest Winners Announced,” *Hitchin’ Post*, April 1958, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 21, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

been foregrounded here as much as they were in regular meetings, though in at least one place where they do appear, they are an overarching theme of the entire camp. In a 1943 camp handbook, girls are instructed to choose one of three camp schedules for the week, each named after a famous emigrant trail: Santa Fe, Overland, and Great Northern.²⁵⁰ Girls would do activities to accumulate points over the course of the week to “reach the Gold Coast of California” in a kind of analog proto-*Oregon Trail* nearly 30 years before that game’s debut. *Trail Echoes*, the Pioneer Girls newsletter from that same year, again nods to the pioneer theme and is decorated with a tipi-and-canoe motif.²⁵¹

All of these themes and motifs reinforced nostalgia for the period of white American westward expansion and, with it, the spread of Christianity across the North American continent. Beyond the pioneer games and covered wagons, however, these themes helped establish the ideal Christian girlhood of the Pioneer Girls organization toward which participants were expected to strive. The figure of the pioneer was meant to help girls inhabit the role of capable, outdoorsy, traditional, Christian girl that was idealized in both the organization and the broader white American evangelicalism of the period. Both the pioneer theme and the girlhood ideal in question were reactions against fears about urban, soft, secular modernity related to everything from the explosion of sedentary office jobs to the godless Soviet threat.²⁵² By leaning on nostalgia for the pioneer, evangelicals could create an alternate future more in line with their Christian-America ideals.

²⁵⁰ Pioneer Girls, *Cherith Chips*.

²⁵¹ “Trail Echoes” (Pioneer Girls, 1943), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 32, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁵² Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Koerselman, “Invading Vacationland for Christ”; Kruse, *One Nation Under God*; Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Sutton, *American Apocalypse*; David Harrington Watt, “The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, 1925-1975,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (1991): 155–75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1123869>.

The pioneer girl thus served as an avatar of self-reliance and individuality—two characteristics that were at the core of white American evangelicalism. It is worth noting that they were also important virtues in white, middle-class American culture more generally (especially with the Cold War-era rise of the suburbs), although in the context of Protestant hegemony the two can be difficult to untangle.²⁵³ But the idea of Pioneer Girls as a white space was even—maybe especially—apparent when the organization moved beyond language of pilgrims and colonists and into discussions of indigeneity, which it especially tended to do in the later Cold War period. In 1974, Pioneer Girls announced that it would be splitting its formerly three age levels into five, doing away with Pilgrims and Colonists and instead introducing (in ascending age order) Voyagers, Lavaliers, Trailblazers, Shikaris, and Explorers. The Voyager name draws on the initial first rank within the old Pilgrim group, and Lavaliers refers to the gem-encrusted jewelry into which participants would be metaphorically formed through the program. Although the decision to restructure signaled a move away from the nostalgic historical chronology used previously, it also introduced, in the Trailblazers and Shikaris, two figures associated with colonial pasts that participants would assume as temporary identities. These identities, however, did not work toward inclusion but rather tended to reinforce difference, in a continuation of a long white American Protestant tradition of defining civilized Christianity in opposition to indigeneity by dipping into the experiences of the latter as it served that Christianity's colonialist needs.²⁵⁴

The handbooks for Trailblazers and Shikaris, in fact, highlighted the overall whiteness of Pioneer Girls. The Trailblazers handbook, written for girls in fifth through seventh grades, bears

²⁵³ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*; Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*.

²⁵⁴ Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*; Gin Lum, *Heathen*.

a design scheme modeled on stereotyped Native American motifs throughout its pages. Girls are guided through the book by a character named Susan Nelson, “a full-blooded American Indian” who has “an Indian father and an Indian squaw for a mother” (the slur was removed from later editions, which also lightened Susan’s skin in the accompanying illustrations).²⁵⁵ Susan’s lack of specificity with regard to her tribal affiliation indicates that Trailblazers were meant to represent a white person’s idea of a Native American, and reading Susan’s commentary reveals a desire to claim the perceived positive aspects of indigenous peoples (nobility, tradition) while explicitly fighting the negative (heathendom, violence) and relegating the latter to an uncivilized past. Susan even describes herself, though not in as many words, as fully assimilated in all the important ways: going by an English name, living in a city, practicing Christianity. Susan is reminiscent of the ways the (allegedly) less religious Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls highlighted their own Americanness, by “playing Indian” themselves and by highlighting their foreign-but-assimilated founders in their organizational histories.²⁵⁶ These assimilation stories, Leslie Hahner has written, encouraged every group participant, regardless of her background, to “understand herself as an American so long as she revered the virtues of national loyalty, unity, and service these figures were made to represent.”²⁵⁷ The figure of the (not foreign, but also not white) Susan harnesses this same tactic while emphasizing another characteristic of the normal American girl: her Protestant Christianity.

The Pioneer Girls’ organizational overhaul took place on the heels of the rapid growth of liberation movements including the anti-Vietnam War protests, women’s liberation, gay liberation, Black Power, Red Power, and more. Though the Pioneer Girls tended not to address

²⁵⁵ Dorothy Knox, ed., *The Bridge*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1974), 19–20; Lila Bishop, ed., *The Bridge*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Clubs, 1982), 19.

²⁵⁶ Deloria, *Playing Indian*; Hahner, “Practical Patriotism.”

²⁵⁷ Hahner, “Practical Patriotism,” 121.

these social movements directly, they did often incorporate them to some small degree in a fashion common to evangelicalism in order to be seen as not hopelessly outdated. The presence of Susan may reflect the fact that, by the 1970s and the growing prominence of the American Indian Movement, it was becoming more difficult for even white suburban Christians to relegate Native Americans entirely to the past that Pioneer Girls drew on. Instead, with Susan, the Pioneer Girls acknowledged the continued existence of Native Americans while leaving the whiteness of ideal evangelical girlhood in place. Such a move continued to present white Christianity in contrast with an imagined uncivilized opposite while, in the Christian Susan, maintaining the importance of the Manifest Destiny Christian-conversion narrative. While Susan herself was not a nostalgic figure, what she represented most assuredly was.

The category of Shikaris, for grades seven through nine, is more puzzling in the context of American settler-colonialist motifs, but makes more sense when read through the concept of white space. A shikari, that group's handbook explains, "is a professional guide or hunter of big game in India," imagined as guiding white (presumably British) clients on a wilderness adventure.²⁵⁸ Historically, shikaris could be either Indian or European, though the latter were typically born in India and themselves embodied white colonialism. It is also interesting to note that, like the earlier rank of Townsman, a Shikari was explicitly described as a man. Girls were instructed to take on "his skill, his knowledge of the animals and their habitat, and his willingness to serve others." Nothing is said about his race or possible non-Christian religious identity.

The use of masculine terms to describe girls' ranks was no doubt in part due to the simple fact that, in the midcentury United States, it was still standard for generic terms (like townsman)

²⁵⁸ Wilma Garrett et al., eds., *Crossroads*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1974), 3.

to be masculine. The masculine gendering likely has more to do with general-purpose patriarchy than specifically evangelical patriarchy within the Pioneer Girls. However, it is also worth considering the possibility that the selective taking on of masculine identity may do similar work to the selective taking on of racial and ethnic identities. Leslie Paris has proposed that donning the mantle of male characters may have allowed midcentury girls to “play more adventurously.”²⁵⁹ In this way, being a townsman or shikari meant claiming positive masculine aspects of the gender binary (bravery, self-reliance) while ultimately remaining a Pioneer *Girl*.

While it took a new turn with the Pioneer Girls’ overhaul, selectively taking on indigenous identities was not only a practice that occurred in Pioneer Girls handbooks, and it was not just introduced in the ’70s. Rather, from the organization’s beginnings, groups (fortalices) were shown to throw theme parties, including parties involving dressing up as Native Americans. The Pioneer Girls newsletter occasionally included photos and descriptions of such parties in its updates on groups across the country. One early mention occurs in the April 1950 newsletter, which describes the fortalice of Gary, Indiana, holding “an Indian Pow-Wow Party” with costumes and unspecified “games...based on Indian customs.”²⁶⁰ Central to the party were “Indian names” given to the girls the week before; girls were rewarded if they only responded to their “Indian name” for the duration of the party, and the party finished with each girl telling “an imaginary story” of how she got the name.

Much like adopting the shikari title, clubs would on occasion throw similar parties featuring activities of indigenous peoples outside of the United States, often paired with updates from missionaries working with those groups. In 1953, the organizational newsletter promoted

²⁵⁹ Paris, “Adventures of Peanut and Bo,” 96.

²⁶⁰ “Indian Pow-Wow Party,” *Hitchin’ Post*, April 1950, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 18, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College. The same newsletter includes mention of an “Indian chief doll” made by the presumed-white owner of a doll museum in Montana.

such a party held by a Lansing club with the headline “Natives for a Night, in which girls dressed up “in the native costume of Pakistani women” as a returned missionary “compared the dress of Oriental people with ours and then compared the walk of the heathen with that of the Christian.”²⁶¹ This was not a one-off event, but rather a strategy promoted in leader materials: nearly 20 years later, in 1972, a guide for Pilgrim groups prominently featured these kinds of playacting activities as part of a “Christians Around the World (Missions)” unit. Along with stories from missionaries themselves, the unit featured a comprehensive guide for throwing a Mexico-themed party, including sections on Mexican games and food, Las Posadas activities, and a “Mexican rattle” craft activity.²⁶² Such activities were intended to help participants better understand the environments in which missionaries worked by placing them in the shoes of the missionized, with the understanding that the participants themselves were white and middle-class, with no other way to affectively understand the mission field.

While selective claiming of indigenous roles is the most explicit example of the Pioneer Girls’ relationship to race, contrast with indigeneity appeared in smaller ways, too. In materials throughout the organization’s history, imaginary indigenous characters were used to convey lessons in wisdom and loyalty: a 1969 Bible study guide prefaces a proverb, “As the old Indian said...”; a 1954 newsletter relays the story of Lakshmi, a Hindu girl who is brought to Christianity by white missionaries and, in the process, learns that white people are not as bad as people say.²⁶³ Group names within a new fortalice in Holland, Michigan, in 1948 included, on

²⁶¹ “Natives for a Night,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1953, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁶² *Pilgrim Program Idea Book 2* (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1972).

²⁶³ Pioneer Girls, “By Love Serve: 1969 Explorer Leadership Conference Bible Exploration” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1969), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 1, folder 13, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; Kim, “The Split Rock: A Story,” *Hitchin’ Post*, December 1954, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 20, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

one hand, Covered Wagon and Frontier and, on the other, Red Skins and Fleeting Arrow.²⁶⁴ The same newsletter issue in which these names appear recommends a Christian children's mystery book that appears to feature Native characters and an "Indian Sunday school" quite prominently. These passing references helped to build up the Pioneer Girls imaginary as a white one, characterizing nonwhite peoples as distant or, at least, different from the implicitly white, pioneer-identified reader.

The Pioneer Girls' orientation toward American indigeneity and its relationship to the past, at least, shifted over the decades, with developments such as the first appearance of Susan Nelson in 1974 and a 1972 Colonist handbook offering instructions for how to obtain a badge in "Indian lore."²⁶⁵ An undated badge supplement likely from the 1960s or 1970s offers a badge in "Indian heritage," with activities including collecting examples of stereotyping and interrogating how differences between "the Indians' (and Eskimos') traditional economic system of sharing" and "the individualistic system of capitalism" might impact Native Americans both on and off reservations (perhaps surprising, especially in light of an anti-communism badge found elsewhere in the book).²⁶⁶ Another possible activity was to read a book about pioneers and assess it for bias about Native Americans, a major shift from earlier materials that themselves engaged in such bias. Despite these concerns, however, the baseline assumption here as elsewhere was that participants were white.

In addition to Indian heritage badges, Pioneer Girls by the 1970s could earn badges in Black heritage and "Spanish-speaking American" heritage—which were distinct from the "family history" badge, implying that the heritage badges were largely intended for learning

²⁶⁴ "Shares Boosted in Holland," *Hitchin' Post*, April 1948, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 17, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁶⁵ *Colonist Program Idea Book 2* (Wheaton, IL: Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1972), 150.

²⁶⁶ "Colonist/Explorer Badge Supplement," 35.

about others' heritages.²⁶⁷ This unmarked whiteness is far from unique to the Pioneer Girls, but nevertheless speaks to the implicit whiteness of the space and, by extension, the racially inflected goals of American evangelicalism around this time. Importantly for this particular discussion, the Black heritage badge makes note in its introduction that it "is suggested for both black and white Explorers," while the badge for Indian heritage offers no such note, asserting instead that the activities would simply help participants study "the life-style and problems of another of our minority groups."²⁶⁸ One of four options given for a final activity is to "make friends with an Indian or Eskimo girl [and] ask about her people's ways and problems."²⁶⁹ Such an activity placed unknown indigenous girls in the position of teaching white ones about problems largely caused by white people. It also assumed that said indigenous girls were not already part of the Pioneer Girls. Despite this activity being suggested around the same time Susan Nelson was introduced, the assumption remained that indigenous girls, while important and possessing desirable qualities, were not part of the ideal Christian girlhood promoted by Pioneer Girls, and that Susan Nelson was above all a fictional character.

Christians, Heathens, and Temporality

The Pioneer Girls' imaginary operated on contrast by promoting a historiographical mythology of Christianity and implied whiteness versus heathendom and implied indigeneity, a phenomenon with a long American history explored in depth by Kathryn Gin Lum.²⁷⁰ This mythology, in turn, provided the foundation for critical-nostalgic practices intended to bring purportedly positive but lost attributes of the past into the present. Gin Lum argues that a good amount of the power of white American Christianity is in its contrast with and conversion of the

²⁶⁷ "Colonist/Explorer Badge Supplement," 35.

²⁶⁸ "Colonist/Explorer Badge Supplement," 3; "Colonist/Explorer Badge Supplement," 34.

²⁶⁹ "Colonist/Explorer Badge Supplement," 36.

²⁷⁰ Gin Lum, *Heathens*.

figure of the heathen, and that is what appears here as well. While on the surface the indigenous playacting in which they sometimes engaged would seem to make the Pioneer Girls less white, it actually worked to emphasize the white ideal. After all, it is less of a theme party to dress up as Native Americans if such people are considered anything more than a costume to don for fun. Further, such parties encouraged girls to relive the Old West that formed the basis of the Pioneer Girls imaginary, allowing them to have fun with briefly occupying the position of pre-Christian (never simply non-Christian) Americans. These particular Indians were pagans relegated to the past, conceived in opposition to the Christian pioneers committed to spreading their religion and civilization from sea to shining sea.

While they did imagine themselves in indigenous identities, the Pioneer Girls spent more time imagining themselves on the other side of the coin. The contrast to Native Americans was made explicit in one description from 1963 of group titles: “To protect *people* from the *Indians*, a pioneer town would often have a small fortification built of stout logs. This was called a fortalice (pronounced fort’-a-liss). Your club is known in Pioneer Girls language as a fortalice.”²⁷¹ Cities with several fortalices would “band together” under a “fort” to facilitate inter-group activities. The conqueror imagery went all the way to the top, with the president of the organization being called the “Fortress Commander” from the organization’s first constitution through at least 1956.²⁷² Such a description encouraged an embattled-evangelical attitude using a metaphor of white pioneers defending against the nefarious outside forces of indigeneity.

Beyond the groups of white girls that Pioneer Girls is best known for, it also, like other evangelical organizations, put resources toward spreading its religious practices to other parts of

²⁷¹ Pioneer Girls, *Colonist Trail Book*, 11. Emphasis mine.

²⁷² “Revised Constitution.”

the world. A Pioneer Girls group is mentioned as existing in Africa as early as 1948, but this group appears to have been for the children of white missionaries.²⁷³ In 1949, the Pioneer Girls sent its first official missionary to South Africa to do humanitarian work and evangelize.²⁷⁴ By 1953, the organization had added three other missionaries, to Mexico, the Netherlands, and Japan; ten years after that, the number of missionaries had risen to seven.²⁷⁵ Working under mission boards but funded directly by monthly contributions from Pioneer Girls participants, these young women sent dispatches from their mission sites to the Pioneer Girls newsletter, distributed to members nationwide.²⁷⁶

These missives would include a mix of updates on evangelism and information on the ways of life in the towns and villages where the missionaries lived. The missionaries in Mexico and South Africa, in particular, focused on the poverty and paganism of their mission sites, detailing healthcare emergencies among children in the villages and folk practices that the missionaries worked to make obsolete. The missionaries in the Netherlands and Japan, meanwhile, focused more on the charming quirks of their new countries, and mission talk tended mostly to imagine these sites as not having religious beliefs at all, rather than the wrong ones. This may arise from the fact that the Netherlands were largely white and Japan largely ethnically Japanese in 1952 and 1953, when the missionaries respectively began their projects.²⁷⁷ Although

²⁷³ “Pioneer Girls in Africa,” *Hitchin’ Post*, April 1948, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 17, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁷⁴ “Sandy Speaks at Rallies,” *Hitchin’ Post*, May 1949, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 17, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁷⁵ “News of Katie and Her Tribe,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1953, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Doc Went to Camp...Did You?,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1953, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Bon Voyage,” *Hitchin’ Post*, October 1953, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary.”

²⁷⁶ “Revised Constitution.”

²⁷⁷ “‘This Is Doc’: Pioneer Girls’ Missionary #3,” *Hitchin’ Post*, April 1952, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College; “Bon Voyage.”

Japanese is definitely not the same as white, the 1950s were when the American model-minority view of Asian populations took hold, which may have contributed to their different treatment in the missionary dispatches.²⁷⁸ Beyond racialized preconceptions, however, these attitudes may have arisen from geography itself: the Netherlands and Japan both lay in the global north, whereas Mexico and South Africa were squarely in the “third world” favored in the broader Cold War evangelical missionary imaginary, giving more reason to characterize these populations as heathens stuck in an unfavorable past and in need of saving by missionaries practicing critical nostalgia connected to a very different temporal positionality.²⁷⁹

The Pioneer Girls missionary imaginary, as the midcentury evangelical missionary imaginary more broadly, is most starkly illustrated in a March 1952 dispatch from Sandy, the Pioneer Girls missionary in South Africa.²⁸⁰ The entire dispatch consists of a little over a page of photos taken by Sandy, accompanied by handwritten descriptions. The final two pictures in the series demonstrate the difference missionaries could make: on the left, two African children in what are either diapers or loincloths, bellies distended, with no indications to their gender. They are labeled, “Two heathen children from a native ‘kraal.’” On the right is another African child, this one in a puffy white dress: “a little girl from a Christian home.” As if this weren’t enough, Sandy closes her missive with a lesson: “From these pictures and comments you may well ask yourself why you are so favored with health, clothing, warmth, and medical care, when these in Africa have so little. These two pictures show the difference Christianity makes in any home—even in those in South Africa.”

²⁷⁸ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

²⁷⁹ McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*.

²⁸⁰ “Hospital Days in Zululand,” *Hitchin’ Post*, March 1952, Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 2, folder 19, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

Sandy's diptych illustrated to readers that beyond saving souls, evangelism had a positive Westernizing, even gendering, influence. Girls reading the newsletter were urged to note the difference between themselves and the "heathen" children, and both the transformation and similarity to themselves of the Christian girl. Missionized peoples were in this way shown as part of the "body of Christ," presented to be both saved and identified with in a scheme common to what Melanie McAlister has identified as evangelical internationalism.²⁸¹

In addition to participating in this midcentury evangelical internationalism, the Pioneer Girls organization promoted missionaries as part of its own mission. "Camping skills help prepare girls for service in primitive areas," reads a promotional pamphlet from 1964.²⁸² The outdoorsiness that was purportedly part of life for any normal American girl, then, was also a critical-nostalgic practice. Practices that referred back to a pioneer past were perfect preparation for creating a particular future by enacting a modern-day Manifest Destiny, remaking not just the United States but the entire world in the Pioneer Girl's nostalgic, American, Christian image. As a Pioneer Girl grew up, she was increasingly exposed to missionary work as an option for her future. Guidebooks and badge achievements for high school-aged Explorers included guidance for life after high school, which included mission work, other jobs (often secretarial work), or marriage; guides also included information for how to make marriage work within either of the two career options. A 1966 badge supplement had sections on marriage as well as "jungle survival," which included a missionary testimony on how "Pioneer Girls prepared me for the jungle."²⁸³ In a similar document from 1969, a section on marriage (complete with a "mock

²⁸¹ McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*.

²⁸² "Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary."

²⁸³ "1966-67 Explorer Program Supplement" (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1966), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 5, folder 37, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

wedding rehearsal”) is immediately followed by a section on missions.²⁸⁴ A “Careers and College Achievement Unit” found in a 1971 book for adult leaders of Explorers groups covers career options, two of which are missionary work and a job as a Pioneer Girls field representative (which was basically home-office missionary work).²⁸⁵ This is not to say that Pioneer Girls were pressured to be missionaries exclusively—in each of these documents, dating and marriage occupy more space than missionary work does—but the prominence of this kind of work does speak to the privileged place of white missionaries in the Pioneer Girls organization.

In a way particular to the white pioneer imaginary undergirding the Pioneer Girls, missionaries very specifically represented the pioneer, going as lone Christians to bring new ideas and civilization to the wilderness (the wilderness being, in this scheme, Black and brown people worldwide). A 1964 anniversary pamphlet points this out: “Pioneer Girls of 1964 may well be God’s chosen servants to help meet the needs of girls in lands where Christ is not known as He is here. And the girls who respond to this challenge will discover that our ‘pioneering’ days are not over yet!”²⁸⁶ These missionaries thus presented one future option for the girls funding them. The organization not only characterized missionaries as pioneers, thus achieving the critical-nostalgic goals of the project, but also made note of ways participating could help girls get there.

Missionaries also propagated the Pioneer Girls as such, starting both Pioneer Girls groups and spinoff “sister” groups at their mission sites. For the children of other missionaries, the missionaries would simply start Pioneer Girls fortalices. But recognizing the particular

²⁸⁴ “1969-70 Explorer Program Supplement” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1969), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 6, folder 1, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁸⁵ “Explorer Program Plans Book I” (Pioneer Girls, Inc., 1971), Collection 264 Records of Pioneer Ministries, box 6, folder 3, Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College.

²⁸⁶ “Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary.”

Americanness (and, very occasionally, Canadianness) of the Pioneer Girls, the organization would not permit the establishment of groups directly under the Pioneer Girls umbrella for girls who had no claim to these characteristics. Instead, missionaries aiming to start Pioneer Girls-inspired girls' ministries would found sister groups, acknowledged but not governed by the mothership. These sister groups were adapted to the local environment and called anything from the straightforward Pioneer Girls of the Philippines to France's Claires Flammes and West Pakistan's Stars of Light.²⁸⁷ Thus, despite participating in a Pioneer Girls program, these missionized groups could never truly call themselves Pioneer Girls.

With the 1980s introduction of coed groups, the particular figures of both the pioneer and the girl began to fade in importance for the organization, though twin nostalgias for imagined American pasts and for imagined American girlhoods remained important to the broader evangelical movement. In the years when the Pioneer Girls began to wane, which coincided with the rise of the Christian right, American evangelicals began to uphold the differences between male and female as an issue of ever-increasing importance.²⁸⁸ For evangelical girlhood, that came to mean that the differences between girls and boys were more significant than the differences between girls and women, resulting in the treatment of girls less as a distinct category and more as women in waiting. Youth programs still aimed to form the one into the other, though now the turn to womanhood was characterized not as gradual but as quite sudden; a key site for this transformation was in the realm of sexuality. As the Pioneer Girls show, a focus on gender has been present from the beginnings of modern American evangelicalism, but it became especially visible in the 1990s and early 2000s with the rise of purity pledges and, in particular,

²⁸⁷ "Pioneer Girls Silver Anniversary."

²⁸⁸ Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings*; Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*; Bartkowski, *Remaking the Godly Marriage*; Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*.

the True Love Waits ministry. The purity movement taught participants to guard their chastity as a form of empowerment and counterculturalism, to retain the innocence of girlhood until marriage, and to anticipate future selves shaped by the movement, who would exhibit a nostalgia for it to be further passed to subsequent generations.

Chapter 3: Future Nostalgia in True Love Waits

In the lyrics to a theme song from the early years of the True Love Waits abstinence campaign, a boy pulls his girlfriend close and tells her, “Don’t be so uptight, the times have changed, you know.”²⁸⁹ However, in exchange for “a moment’s thrill,” the song makes clear that “Satan tries to steal your life.” This song spells out evangelical nostalgia as it manifested in the purity culture of the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as portraying expected gender norms for young participants. The present is here characterized as the enemy in two different ways: the broad present of changed sexual norms, and the immediate present of pressure from one’s boyfriend to have sex. Both represented the potential for an ungodly future. On the other hand, “if you live in purity, in the Father’s time you’ll see a reward”—the Father’s time, of course, being different from the world’s, with different morals that exist alongside but are not the same as the morals of human time.

The flagship organization of the wider evangelical purity movement of the 1990s and early 2000s, True Love Waits taught that American morality could be redeemed if the country’s young people faithfully pledged to abstain from sex until marriage. Through books, events, and even multiple theme songs, the campaign taught its students to situate their bodies in time as potential gifts to their future selves and spouses. The campaign was about *waiting*: not abstinence forever, but abstinence now with an eye on the future payoff, with the participant characterized as waiting for their true love, as well as making themselves into a true love worth waiting for. Participants were urged to exercise a now-familiar critical nostalgia for earlier times, in this case for times in particular when it was easier to avoid sex before marriage. However,

²⁸⁹ Turner Lawton, Robin Wolaver, and Bill Wolaver, *True Love Waits* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of Southern Baptist Convention, 1993).

another nostalgia was also introduced: participants were urged to live in such a way that, in the future, they could reach to their own past virginal selves as further objects of critical nostalgia.

True Love Waits appeared future-focused sometimes to the exclusion of most anything else. The True Love Waits purity pledge was made, in part, to one's "future mate [and] future children," and the emphasis was on the benefits of waiting to have sex until a specified point in the future.²⁹⁰ However, nostalgia still lurked at the edges, influencing the movement's function and aims. It was important that the purity movement be countercultural—but counterculture need not be understood only in present-tense terms. It is, in fact, in nods to the dominant culture against which the purity movement claimed to be working that the clearest references to the past can be found.

The theme song is but one example of the way critical nostalgia, and concomitantly the pedagogy of nostalgia, could work without a specific past referent. Other True Love Waits resources throughout the period covered here do the same thing, noting that "today's culture" had a negative influence on the future, with the implicit contrast to the past signaled by "today" being left to the imagination.²⁹¹ However, there were occasions for students to learn nostalgia for certain time periods consistent with the longer history of evangelical nostalgia, in particular for (again, imagined) biblical times. The campaign also engaged in a kind of time-traveling

²⁹⁰ "True Love Waits Covenant Card" (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, ca 1994), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

²⁹¹ David Payne, *True Love Waits Takes a Look at Courting, Dating, & Hanging Out (Girls' Side)* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2000), 27; David Payne, *True Love Waits Takes a Look at Courting, Dating, & Hanging Out (Boys' Side)* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2000), 30; Amy-Jo Girardier, *Authentic Love: Christ, Culture, and the Pursuit of Purity*, True Love Waits (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2016), 20; Pam Gibbs and Mike Wakefield, *Complete: A Life of Purity (Girls' Side)* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2007), 8; Pam Gibbs and Mike Wakefield, *Complete: A Life of Purity (Boys' Side)* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2007), 22. Variations also appear in Clayton King and Sharie King, *True Love Project: How the Gospel Defines Your Purity* (Nashville, Tennessee: LifeWay Press, 2013), 25 ("culture today"); Gary Chapman and Tony Rankin, *A Student's Guide to the Five Love Languages: True Love Waits* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2003), 31 ("today's world"); and Sean McDowell, *Chasing Love*, True Love Waits (Nashville, Tenn.: Lifeway Press, 2020), 16 ("society today").

nostalgia, teaching participants to act in such a way now as to make their future selves thankful for their own past actions, among which were bringing past practices into the present to redeem an allegedly fallen America. One 1997 purity guide phrases this temporality in more theological terms, explaining that “God sees the future the way we see yesterday.”²⁹² In other words, the authors claimed, God wanted students to pledge purity now because doing so created a desirable past...in the future. While the divine point of view does not quite involve nostalgia in the way the human one does, it nevertheless works to situate participants in a kind of salvific temporality, as having a kind of past that could create a better future.

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a high point for the promotion of sexual abstinence, building off, in Moslener’s words, “a politicized evangelical culture that was both appealing and accessible.”²⁹³ Other high-profile campaigns included Silver Ring Thing, a similar but smaller parachurch organization that briefly received federal funding; and Generations of Light, a ministry headquartered in Colorado Springs that was famous for its annual purity ball, during which fathers pledged to “cover” their daughters’ purity.²⁹⁴ Program leaders and individuals could purchase supplies from the Abstinence Clearinghouse, a nonprofit founded in 1997 that as of 2024 is still in business.²⁹⁵ Books such as *And the Bride Wore White* and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, first published in 1999 and 1997, respectively, sold hundreds of thousands of copies.²⁹⁶

²⁹² Jay Strack and Diane Strack, *Until You Say I Do* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 1997), 52.

²⁹³ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 111.

²⁹⁴ Rachel Hart, “The Silver Ring Thing | ACLU,” American Civil Liberties Union, February 23, 2006, <https://www.aclu.org/news/reproductive-freedom/silver-ring-thing>. Silver Ring Thing was rebranded to a ministry called Unaltered in 2019: “What Is Unaltered?,” Unaltered, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.unaltered.org/whatisunaltered>. For information on Generations of Light, see Jennifer Baumgardner, “Would You Pledge Your Virginity to Your Father?,” *Glamour.com*, December 31, 2006, <https://www.glamour.com/story/purity-balls>. I myself attended what turned out to be Generations of Light’s second-to-last purity ball in 2012 as part of my college thesis research.

²⁹⁵ “Abstinence Clearinghouse - Crunchbase Company Profile & Funding,” Crunchbase, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/abstinence-clearinghouse>; “Abstinence Programs, Curricula, Speakers & Materials: Sioux Falls, SD,” Abstinence Clearinghouse, September 6, 2017, <https://abstinence.net>.

²⁹⁶ Dannah Gresh, *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004); Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Updated edition (New York: Multnomah Books, 2003). After feedback from

Teen celebrities like Jessica Simpson and Britney Spears (in the 1990s) and the Jonas Brothers and Miley Cyrus (in the 2000s) publicly pledged to remain virgins until marriage.²⁹⁷ Purity was hot, and True Love Waits was its vanguard.

This chapter focuses primarily on the period from the first True Love Waits pledge service in 1993 through 2013, when the campaign was relaunched as the True Love Project in order to deemphasize the central role of sexual abstinence to the meaning of purity.²⁹⁸ Focusing on the heyday of the movement's biggest player is one way to identify where certain practices came from, where they went, how they influenced evangelical girls going forward, and what roles nostalgia and temporality played in all of it. My focus here is on materials created by True Love Waits, which, as with the previous institutional archives, should be understood as pedagogical materials largely shaped by adults. Though these books, press releases, and other materials do include the voices of students, they are mediated toward pedagogical ends, if they are even real at all. Nevertheless, as with fictional summer-camp letters published in newsletters, or fictional characters dispensing real lessons in a Pioneer Girls handbook, these voices are valuable for the ways they were used to speak to their very real target audience.

Unlike the previous two chapters, here I tread on ground that has been well-researched. My work in this area, in fact, was set in motion by the release in 2011 of Christine Gardner's

readers who were impacted by the book, Harris renounced it in 2018 and requested that it be taken out of print. A year later, he renounced Christianity altogether. Christine Emba, "The Dramatic Implosion of 'I Kissed Dating Goodbye' Is a Lesson — and a Warning," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-dramatic-implosion-of-i-kissed-dating-goodbye-is-a-lesson--and-a-warning/2018/11/14/eeecd65c-e850-11e8-bbdb-72fdbf9d4fed_story.html; Morgan Lee, "Responding to Josh Harris's Announcement," *Christianity Today*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/quick-to-listen/leaving-faith-church-christianity-falling-away-josh-harris.html>.

²⁹⁷ Hazel Cills, "The Rise and Fall of the Pop Star Purity Ring," *Jezebel*, January 25, 2018, <https://jezebel.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-pop-star-purity-ring-1822170318>; Emily Friedman, "Celebrate Celebs Reclaim Their Innocence," *ABC News* (blog), April 1, 2008, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=4560089&page=1>.

²⁹⁸ Aaron Earls, "True Love Waits Relaunched, Refocused as True Love Project," <https://www.baptistpress.com/>, December 1, 2013, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/sbc-life-articles/true-love-waits-relaunched-refocused-as-true-love-project/>.

Making Chastity Sexy, an analysis of the rhetorical devices used by purity organizations to promote abstinence.²⁹⁹ I am also indebted to Sara Moslener’s ongoing work in the space: across two books (one published, one forthcoming) and a podcast, she has deeply investigated the intertwining of evangelical purity culture and whiteness, showing how across history the morality of the United States has been tied up in the state of white girls’ bodies.³⁰⁰ Rather than focus on rhetorical devices or whiteness here, then, I am able to focus instead on the role of temporality within purity culture and its pedagogy around both purity and gender roles. Rather than the broad sweeps of purity culture that previous authors have done, I focus instead on a single campaign at an important time within the larger purity movement.

True Love Waits in Historical Context

The previous chapters have explored the ways that gender performance was in part a nostalgic religious practice for evangelicals from the World War II era through the late 1970s and early 1980s. In that period, girlhood was largely portrayed as an important step on the way to womanhood that was nevertheless a distinct category in its own right. With the rise of the Christian right through the 1980s and early 1990s, however, many evangelicals began emphasizing not just gender roles but gender *difference* to a greater degree—an emphasis that was applied to children and teenagers as much as it was to adults.³⁰¹ One result was the Promise Keepers Christian masculinity campaign, which promoted an affectively expansive but theologically conservative approach to Christian manhood.³⁰² Another was True Love Waits,

²⁹⁹ Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

³⁰⁰ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Sara Moslener, “Pure White,” Pure White, n.d., <https://www.axismundi.us/pure-white/>.

³⁰¹ Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings*; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*; Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*.

³⁰² For more on the Promise Keepers, see Dane S. Claussen, ed., *Standing on the Promises: The Promise Keepers and the Revival of Manhood* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999); David S. Gutterman, *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

which shared those traits. As a result of increased evangelical emphasis on gender difference, emphasis on age difference waned. Boys and girls began to be portrayed less as distinct gender categories from men and women but rather as small steps on the way to the more-important manhood and womanhood, which were emphasized to be roles ordained at birth. For girls, this emphasis on their futures as (Christian) women became especially apparent in the purity movement, which taught them that they needed to preserve their purity in the present lest they become fallen women in the future. The most influential organization within this movement was True Love Waits.

The organizational history of True Love Waits occurred in parallel with what has been termed third-wave feminism, a transformation in the feminist movement that centered individual choices and most famously encouraged sex positivity. This was the culture that True Love Waits saw as its antagonist, but also the culture from which it borrowed strategies of empowerment through choice, though in this case, the choice was not to have sex. Pioneer Girls incorporated developments in feminism and social-justice movements by acknowledging (within limits) that girls could hope to have careers and that nonwhite girls could exist as peers and not simply missionary objects. True Love Waits instead borrowed affects and strategies from the feminism of its era toward quite different ends.

It is true that, unlike summer camps or the Pioneer Girls, True Love Waits did not often point to a particular past focus to bring back. Its nostalgia came from a different angle: not a longing for an identified past so much as an opposition to the present—a move that nevertheless functioned as a form of critical nostalgia in harnessing this opposition, and its implied valorization of a superior past from which the country had fallen, to create the future that was the

2006); Melanie Heath, "Soft-Boiled Masculinity: Renegotiating Gender and Racial Ideologies in the Promise Keepers Movement," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 3 (2003): 423–44.

primary focus of the movement. This manifested in numerous ways: criticism of American culture “today,” instruction in gender roles said to be deemed too restrictive by modern secular feminism, relationship with Old Testament narratives involving virginity and lack thereof, promotion of practices such as courting (which was, in fact, a newer practice that only sort of resembled its historical referent). To be counterculturally evangelical was not, or not only, to emulate the youth culture of purportedly secular society, but rather to counter the culture with elements of the past.

Although *True Love Waits* “premiered” in 1993, it in truth marked a splashy new turn in Southern Baptist (SBC) sex education efforts that had been going on for more than a decade.³⁰³ Starting as early as the 1970s, the SBC turned its attention to issues of gender and sexuality among youth—and not just its own members, as the church’s emphases on ecumenicism and on influencing sex ed in public schools made clear.³⁰⁴ Indeed, this project was never just aimed at other Southern Baptists. The materials the SBC published as part of its sex ed efforts were promoted and distributed far beyond the denomination in a strategy that predicted the spread of *True Love Waits*.³⁰⁵ In some ways, these shifts in focus track with the shifts the Pioneer Girls saw in the same decade, although SBC materials were much more explicit in being a reaction to the feminist movement.

This reaction, which was happening across evangelicalism, was not strictly oppositional but rather, as Sara Moslener has noted, “syncretistic.”³⁰⁶ As the previous chapter has shown, this

³⁰³ “True Love Waits Premiered,” *Youth Ministry Now!*, April 22, 1993, AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³⁰⁴ Associated Press, “Southern Baptists Back Guides on Sex Education,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 1970.

³⁰⁵ The publishing arm of the SBC eventually became Lifeway Christian Resources, which, while it still operates under the purview of the SBC, provides resources to evangelical churches beyond the denomination and reported more than \$245 million in sales in 2022. Hoover’s Company Records, “Lifeway Christian Resources of The Southern Baptist Convention,” *Hoover’s Company Records* (Fort Mill, United States: Mergent, 2023), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1860777191/abstract/DE953046B8744C40PQ/1>.

³⁰⁶ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 80.

syncretism came across most clearly in the quiet adoption of countercultural and pop-cultural aesthetics and also entailed the incorporation of certain aspects of social-justice movements themselves.³⁰⁷ Materials from mainline churches in this period show a concern with “sex role stereotyping,” especially as it was negatively applied to children: one 1972 handout from the American Baptist Church, but found in the SBC archives, encourages readers to “avoid stereotyping of mother and father roles,” noting that “basic sex role identification for children comes through identification with the same-sexed parent.”³⁰⁸ A report on “sex role stereotyping in church school curricula,” again published by a non-SBC organization (Joint Educational Development, out of the Episcopal Church) but found in the SBC archive, notes such stereotyping across Sunday school materials, arguing, “It is vitally important...that adults become aware of the manifold ways in which a child’s development is restricted and her self-image is smothered.”³⁰⁹

I note that these non-SBC materials were found in an SBC archive in order to stress that their presence there is evidence of syncretistic activity. The SBC took concerns about gender stereotypes not just from a broader society encountering second-wave feminism but also from other denominations, and then created those concerns in its own image; this phenomenon can also be found in the previous chapter, when Pioneer Girls incorporated aspects of the civil rights and feminist movements within particular limits. For example, a 1975 issue of *The Student*, an SBC magazine geared toward college-aged Christians, offered guidance to young women on how to navigate sexism in employment, housing, and finances in light of new laws such as Title

³⁰⁷ For more on these aesthetics in evangelicalism, see Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy*; Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

³⁰⁸ “Guidelines for Avoiding Sex Role Stereotypes” (National Council of Churches Office of Family Ministries, ca 1972), AR 138-2, box 36, folder 20, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³⁰⁹ Beach, “Sex Role Stereotyping in Church School Curricula,” 17.

VII and the Fair Credit Reporting Act, and another article discusses the problem of children being pressured to fit stereotypes in much the same way as other churches of the period.³¹⁰ However, the latter article also emphasizes that “we can celebrate our distinctiveness as male and female,” and a different article on gender roles in marriage characterizes women’s liberation groups as “propaganda clusters encouraging women to assert themselves against men.”³¹¹ The entire issue leaves the impression that feminism must be opposed to equality. Ultimately, efforts seem to have been made to strike a balance between avoiding stereotyping and endorsing innate differences between two genders, a needle-threading exercise that became starker with the rise of True Love Waits and the purity movement.

Complementing education about gender, education about sexuality foreshadowed True Love Waits in its emphasis on sexual abstinence. A particular driver for both the nascent purity movement and the Christian right with which it had a symbiotic relationship was the rise of AIDS among gay men in the 1980s. Early in the disease’s presence in the United States, evangelicals claimed that the new deadly disease was a consequence for the sinful activity of gay men.³¹² This move had an effect of demonizing gay-male sex and upholding straight-married sex as the only correct way of having sex. Furthermore, the promotion by AIDS activists of so-called safe sex pushed the Christian right in the opposite direction toward promoting abstinence.

Interestingly, lesbians were rarely, if ever, mentioned in these discussions, giving the impression

³¹⁰ Teena Andrews, “Women and the Law,” *The Student*, May 1975, AR 138-2, box 36, folder 23, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives; Ira Peak and Ashli Peak, “Free to Be You and Me,” *The Student*, October 1975, AR 138-2, box 36, folder 23, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³¹¹ Peak and Peak, “Free to Be You and Me,” 19; Lofton Hudson, “Thinking About Marriage: Who Will Wear the Pants?,” *The Student*, May 1975, 50, AR 138-2, box 36, folder 23, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³¹² Anthony Michael Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). True Love Waits would eventually see AIDS as an opportunity for evangelism—but only because it began to be perceived as an evil striking innocent African women and children in need of missionary help.

that sex between two women or teenage girls may not have counted as sex at all.³¹³ Sexuality was thus, in contrast to the feminist and gay-rights movements, implied to largely be the domain of boys and men, and girls and women were mostly portrayed as the receivers of it. These gender roles would later show up substantially in True Love Waits materials.

Books published for children by the SBC in the years preceding True Love Waits emphasized a theological understanding of gender roles, making a link between body and soul that characterized certain (largely unspecified) differences between boys and girls as innate and God-ordained. The *Sexuality in Christian Living* series of books, published in 1973 by the SBC's Christian Life Commission, comprised a group of five books aimed at escalating age groups. For ages 6-8, there was *Made to Grow*, which "discusses differences between sexes, God's creation, beginnings and endings of life, and family relationships." Ages 9-11 got *The Changing Me*, which "tells of God's plan in creating different sexes." For ages 12-14, *Growing Up with Sex* "gives information about biological makeup, development of male and female roles, and the reproductive process."³¹⁴

These books gradually introduced issues of sexuality into discussions of gender as the series took readers through high school; descriptions of the final book for ages 15-17, as well as the book for parents, focus entirely on sexuality rather than gender; I was unfortunately not able to procure copies to ascertain whether this is the case within the books themselves. The graduated approach, described as introducing the topic of sexuality in age-appropriate ways throughout childhood, first grounded children in teachings about what it meant to be a gendered

³¹³ Queer women who grew up going to evangelical youth groups have noted that they were able to have fairly public romantic and sexual relationships with other girls because their leaders never actually noticed. E.g., *Exposing Myself* 🍌 #fyp #lgbt #WidenTheScreen #gaytiktok #bisexual 🏳️ #trending #church #firsttime #itwasntaphase, TikTok (dankest.bi.babe, 2021), <https://www.tiktok.com/@dankest.bi.babe/video/6952219264178851077>.

³¹⁴ "'Sexuality in Christian Living' Series," ca 1987, AR 138-2, box 76, folder 21, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

Christian subject before introducing topics such as how babies are made, what masturbation is and why not to do it, and the pitfalls of sex before marriage (the best way to avoid which was, of course, abstinence). Introducing gender as an explicit topic of theological discussion is significant not just because it tracked with puberty-induced bodily changes but also because it emphasized early on the theological implications of being a girl or boy.

Though these materials were published by the SBC and initially promoted within the denomination, they did not stay there and, as with the officially unaffiliated parachurch organizations explored in previous chapters, targeted young people well beyond the denomination. As the politicized movement for Christian family values gained steam, led by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the SBC became more active in spreading its approach to sex ed to public schools across the nation, and eventually to other countries.³¹⁵

All this set the stage for the development of the True Love Waits campaign, which held its first event in April 1993 at Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Tennessee, when 54 teenage participants pledged not to have sex until their wedding nights.³¹⁶ The event kicked off a nationwide initiative encompassing youth group curricula, family Bible studies, church services, and rallies at the local, state, and national levels to promote the idea that rather than engage in the "safe sex" promoted in particular by AIDS activists, youth should abstain from sex entirely until marriage. The campaign worked behind the scenes to garner press coverage for its events, the largest of which involved the public display of pledge cards signed by participants: 210,000 on

³¹⁵ Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution*; Seth Dowland, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda," *Church History* 78, no. 3 (2009): 606–31; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

³¹⁶ "True Love Waits Premiered."

the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1994; 340,000 at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta in 1996; 100,000 on the Golden Gate Bridge in 1999.³¹⁷

True Love Waits was a direct outgrowth of the SBC's Christian Sex Education project, which itself was created to promote a conservative Christian alternative to "our sexually-explicit society."³¹⁸ Thus, while the Christian-America nostalgia that, for instance, the Pioneer Girls promoted was obvious throughout that organization, True Love Waits had no need to emphasize such a past nearly as much—it was part of a larger movement that was already doing that work. Still, a relative lack of references to idealized white American pasts does not mean this vision of America was not foundational to the organization. That foundation set a pattern for the meaning and experience of evangelical girlhood into the present.

Although high schoolers were the population of most concern, True Love Waits saw as its audience young people from middle school through college, aiming to impact those beyond its denomination of origin through both its ecumenicism and its integration into school and civic environments. In the initial launch materials for True Love Waits, strategies were provided for parents wanting to introduce it to their children, ministers to their churches, youth to their communities, and, according to an internal report, "certain key media" to the nation.³¹⁹ The organization's first national-level event centered on the Mall in Washington, D.C., during the DC '94 Youth Evangelism SuperConference organized by Youth for Christ.

³¹⁷ *Crossing Bridges with Purity: True Love Waits 1999-2000 Manual* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 1998); "History of True Love Waits," Lifeway, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/product-family/true-love-waits/history>.

³¹⁸ Jimmy Hester, "True Love Waits," *Living with Teenagers*, October 1994, AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives; "Who's Teaching Our Children About Sex?" (Baptist Book Stores, ca 1994), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³¹⁹ "True Love Waits Info Sheet" (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, ca 1994), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

Purity, Temporality, and Christian America

In the years after the rally at the Mall, organizers were encouraged to find similar spaces, like state legislatures and courthouse lawns, to display pledge cards. Public spaces were chosen to “make a stronger impact on the moral climate of their state,” while civic spaces presented a distinct opportunity: “Governors and members of the state legislature have to take notice when thousands of their young citizens joyfully and boldly proclaim their commitment to moral purity.”³²⁰ The True Love Waits Goes Campus initiative, begun in 1997, encouraged students to “[take] the abstinence challenge to their peers in secondary schools and on college campuses across America” as part of a broader initiative to spread the message to governments and other non-church zones.³²¹ Unlike at least one other purity campaign, True Love Waits never accepted government funding. However, it nevertheless played a large part in the growth of abstinence-only sex education in the 1990s, and its aim was clear: to build a better future by promoting virginity to the youth of America (and, eventually, the world).³²²

Purity did not only place True Love Waits participants in relationship to their hypothetical future true loves and past selves; it also pointed them toward an evangelizing relationship with communities outside their own, whether within the United States or beyond it. As a hallmark movement of American evangelicalism in the 1990s, True Love Waits bore some of the same nationalistic traits as the youth phenomena explored in previous chapters. As with these other parachurch groups, the nationalism here was not necessarily militant or even political, though the larger purity movement did directly engage public institutions more than the Pioneer Girls or Christian summer camps did. It was not just about aspects of the past, but about

³²⁰ *Crossing Bridges*, 46.

³²¹ *Crossing Bridges*, 4.

³²² For more on the purity movement’s relationship with the U.S. government, see Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 113–18.

America's potential capacity to create a more Christian future not just for the country but for the world.

True Love Waits from its inception engaged the idea of the United States as an object of redemption. This was one advantage of being backed by an established denomination: the SBC provided existing infrastructure for rapid growth, as well as an overarching organizational scheme to enact that redemption. Shortly after its launch in Tennessee, the campaign began tracking the state conventions where campaign events were being held, both in the run-up to the 1994 Washington, D.C., rally and afterward.³²³ While adult leaders claimed True Love Waits was a youth-led movement, it is more accurate to say that it was a youth-oriented organization.³²⁴ Rather than the grassroots movement spreading like wildfire that promoters advertised, the campaign was carefully planned, with specific guidelines and materials offered to youth leaders for events at the church, local, state, and national levels. On at least two occasions there were also major international events planned, though more often, international events would happen at their own local levels, and emphasis more typically remained on the United States.³²⁵

An examination of such materials reveals just how deliberate the campaign's presence at schools, civic environments, and national icons was. One explicit goal in the campaign's first year was to "position the BSSB [Baptist Sunday School Board] and Southern Baptists as leaders in a growing movement in the United States advocating abstinence" in opposition to perceptions of a sexually permissive culture that had drifted from a more moral past and now promoted safe

³²³ "States Host True Love Waits Events," *True Love Waits Newsletter*, Winter 1994, AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³²⁴ See Hester, "True Love Waits."

³²⁵ For a description of an event in Argentina, see *Crossing Bridges*, 4. The same page also includes a description of a planned, but apparently never executed, International Date Line project; the latter is not listed in the subsequent year's program plan: *Seize the Net: True Love Waits Seize the Net Manual 2001-2002* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2000), 4.

sex in response to the AIDS crisis.³²⁶ This dynamic has been explored at length by Moslener, who notes that the association between American morals and white girls' bodies existed long before the 1990s.³²⁷ What is notable in the case of True Love Waits is the explicitness with which it promoted this idea, and the precision of the strategy it used to get there.

The term "purity" itself took on a variety of meanings and emphases over the course of the first two decades of True Love Waits. Initially presented exclusively in relation to sex, purity pledges later became symbols of a broader commitment to Christianity and eventually the sexual portion was downplayed, though never extinguished. The very first True Love Waits Pledge from 1993 read: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, my future mate and my future children to be sexually pure until the day I enter a covenant marriage relationship."³²⁸ The following year, "those I date" began to be phased out, either in favor of "my friends"³²⁹ or dropped entirely.³³⁰ The campaign at some point settled on the "friends" version and used it through the turn of the millennium.³³¹ By 2002, the definition of purity had become a bit more expansive: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity *including sexual abstinence* from this day until the day I enter a *biblical*

³²⁶ "True Love Waits Info Sheet."

³²⁷ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

³²⁸ Terri Lackey, "BSSB Launches Abstinence Campaign at Youth Conference," *Baptist Press*, June 1993, AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³²⁹ "An Emphasis on Sexual Abstinence Among Youth" (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, ca 1994), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives; "Church Worship Ideas" (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, ca 1994), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³³⁰ "True Love Waits Info Sheet." Around this time of transition, "those I date" still appeared in Karen Dockrey, "Church Worship Plan" (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, ca 1994), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives; "True Love Waits Covenant Card"; Hester, "True Love Waits."

³³¹ *Crossing Bridges*, 32; *Seize the Net*, 4.

marriage relationship.”³³² This subtle shift shows a desire within True Love Waits to publicly expand beyond the sexual focus of its first decade and to emphasize the role of abstinence in a greater (but otherwise unspecified) collection of traits that come together to make a good Christian.

For the 2013 relaunch, however, the pledge changed drastically, now reading: “In light of who God is, what Christ has done for me, and who I am in Him, from this day forward I commit myself to him in the lifelong pursuit of purity. By His grace, I will continually present myself to Him as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”³³³ In 2016, “purity” was dropped entirely for “personal holiness,” the version still in use today.³³⁴ These changes, which happened in concert with the name change to True Love Project, can, and likely were intended to, be seen as a continuation of the earlier incorporation of sexual purity into some greater purity, taking it further to fully do away with the centrality of chastity to being a good Christian. However, this cannot be true: according to the relaunch press release, “The True Love Project is not simply another Bible study for students on the topic of sex and virginity. Rather, it is a ‘summons’ for the next generation of students to understand their sexuality in light of the gospel.”³³⁵ The sex may have been deemphasized in the new pledge, but to the campaign itself it was still foundational. The shift, then, was not necessarily about downplaying abstinence to its audience so much as it was about downplaying it to outside observers—and avoiding the backlash to the

³³² Emphases mine to mark changes. Paul Kelly, *Sexual Resolutions* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 1999), 28. This version of the pledge also appears in Bill Hughes, *Living Pure inside Out* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2002), 84; Jimmy Hester, *Introduction to True Love Waits* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2004), 48; James Jackson, *Revolutionary Purity* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2006), 59; Gibbs and Wakefield, *Complete (Girls)*, 33.

³³³ King and King, *True Love Project*, 69.

³³⁴ Girardier, *Authentic Love*, 107; McDowell, *Chasing Love*, 128.

³³⁵ Bob Allen, “LifeWay Re-Launches True Love Waits,” Baptist News Global, January 7, 2014, <https://baptistnews.com/article/lifeway-re-launches-true-love-waits/>.

nationalistic Christian purity culture that was growing in the United States around the same time.³³⁶

The 2013 revision was explicitly written to conflate purity with Christianity, one of the relaunch's authors stated at the time: "I want people to know they are pure because Jesus purified them from sin," Clayton King told Baptist News Global, "not because they have perfect behavior and have never had intercourse or looked at porn."³³⁷ However, this was less an actual shift in emphasis and more a shift in branding. While evangelicalism itself is not necessarily (or at least not exclusively) a brand, True Love Waits very much was. Rather than a movement, it was always characterized internally as a "campaign," with not only Bible studies but events and merch to match. It sat, in other words, exactly in the blur between religion and commerce that has been explored by Kathryn Lofton, encouraging youth to identify with purity, and with the particular gender roles that it entailed, by marketing the idea to the youth of America.³³⁸ Beyond being a practice, True Love Waits showed that gender and sexuality within evangelicalism could be a branded identity worn on the left ring finger.

Nostalgia as Counterculture

The True Love Waits campaign was emblematic of the modern evangelical tendency to present itself as a counterculture. As other authors have noted, this countercultural turn became particularly prominent in youth ministries starting in the 1980s and converged with the growing prominence of the Christian right. Eileen Luhr argues that this represented a shift from earlier

³³⁶ See Cills, "The Rise and Fall of the Pop Star Purity Ring"; Rachel Held Evans, "Elizabeth Smart, Human Trafficking, and Purity Culture," *Rachel Held Evans* (blog), May 6, 2013, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/elizabeth-smart-purity-culture/>; Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Abigail Rine, "Why Some Evangelicals Are Trying to Stop Obsessing Over Pre-Marital Sex," *The Atlantic*, May 23, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/05/why-some-evangelicals-are-trying-to-stop-obsessing-over-pre-marital-sex/276185/>.

³³⁷ Allen, "LifeWay Re-Launches True Love Waits."

³³⁸ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*.

conservative Christian attitudes toward “youth culture” and also relied on the co-optation of secular pop-cultural forms popular among contemporary children and teenagers.³³⁹ The new “rock evangelicalism,” crucially, entailed promoting conservative Christianity as “resistance to a sinful world.”³⁴⁰

Although Luhr’s argument centers conservatism in a theological and political sense, I argue that it was also effective in a more literal sense of the term: conservatism as holding onto things past, rendering this particular counterculture a rebellion against the present writ large. My approach to nostalgic evangelical conservatism ultimately draws more from Christian Smith’s foundational work on American evangelicalism’s stance of “embattlement” against the prevailing culture—a stance that has encouraged the movement’s growth rather than hindered it.³⁴¹ Following this line of thought, I am also influenced by Lauren Kerby’s exploration of the use of nostalgic stories by white evangelicals, deployed to reinforce cultural insider or outsider status as needed, though I am thinking in terms of relationality and practice rather than historiography.³⁴² The strategies used by True Love Waits may have been of the moment, but the aims were to inculcate a nostalgia for “traditional” values, portrayed as not currently popular, in order to create a better future. As was the case in previous chapters, this dovetailed with the political flavor of Christian conservatism and (particularly in this case) frequently served its needs. However, by foregrounding evangelical nostalgia rather than the goals of the Christian right, it is possible to consider the purity movement as another lens on how white American

³³⁹ Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*. See also Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

³⁴⁰ Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*, 27.

³⁴¹ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*.

³⁴² Kerby, *Saving History*.

evangelicals lived their embattlement by situating themselves in time, and how girls and their bodies were one way to do that.

Unlike the phenomena of the previous two chapters, however, True Love Waits did not often point its audience to a specific past in its pedagogical materials. In fact, it was a strikingly forward-looking movement, with the focus on a future world shaped by purity and a future individual having benefited from not having had sex prior to their wedding night. Girls here were not taught to be a particular type of girl so much as a particular type of future woman (true love waits, perhaps, for womanhood). However, it is precisely in this future-facing emphasis that nostalgia appears, as by proposing a redeemed future in contrast to the fallen present, the campaign looked to the past for its cues. Its use of contemporary pop culture did not work in opposition to this project; indeed, if considered through Dawdy's critical nostalgia, contemporary forms merely functioned as a tool for the deeper goal of bringing aspects of the past into the future. *This* was the counterculture represented by the purity movement: not a counterculture of rock music as opposed to the previous generation's hymns, and not—or not only—a counterculture of political conservatism, but a culture understood as counter to the present itself.

“Counterculture” is not a term I apply merely as an outside researcher. True Love Waits materials themselves—and even those that predate the movement—promote this nostalgic form of Christianity as a counterculture poised to redeem society and look cool doing it. In a sermon outline provided by True Love Waits to youth leaders at the turn of the millennium, the author recommends pastors play up the idea of counterculture and tell youth that those who have chosen purity “have chosen a path in direct opposition to the world's belief system and direction,” citing this as a literal definition of counterculture. Choosing that path, the sermon suggests, will make

youth a target of Satan but also, “through your lifestyle and testimony, free others who are trapped in Satan’s web of deception.”³⁴³

Other scholars of evangelical counterculture propose that this approach to fighting evil influence is ultimately rooted in individual choices rather than a primary commitment to systemic change, what Moslener has termed the “individualistic turn in American evangelicalism.”³⁴⁴ In this reading, supported by evangelicalism’s emphasis on individual conversion and rebellious counterculture (and, here, individual sexual abstinence), individually made godly choices converge to create the desired world. However, the characterization of evangelical counterculture as entirely individualistic also risks dismissing its critical-nostalgic, world-redeeming aims. As I have noted, evangelicalism is at its heart both individual and relational: it is about each individual practitioner’s personal relationships with other people and divine figures. Though this approach to relationality still centers the individual, it also employs networks of relationship that are important for transmitting the religion to new converts and through time. Through critical nostalgia, evangelicals develop relationships generationally in order to create a better future for themselves, the country, and the world. Said future is also relational: it is right there in the campaign’s name, *True Love Waits*.

Hardwired to Become a Woman

“What does it mean to be a woman?” asks the author of *True Love Waits Takes a Look at Courting, Dating & Hanging Out*. “Women through the ages have been known for the ability to

³⁴³ *Seize the Net*, 15.

³⁴⁴ Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 4. See also Brenneman, *Homespun Gospel*; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*; Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*; Rachel C Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion?: Implications for Theology and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 1 (March 9, 2020): 175–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaa002>.

sway the thoughts and hearts of men... Your femininity is a gift from God. It should be used only according to His purposes."³⁴⁵

True Love Waits, though a pointedly coed movement, nevertheless operated on the assumption that boys and girls were discrete categories with distinct needs. As was established in previous chapters, these categories were fairly expansive and did not on their surface prescribe particular attitudes and behaviors. What they did do was insist that beneath any personal preferences lay innate differences in, for True Love Waits, how girls approached relationships and sexuality as compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the purity movement saw a shift in how girlhood and boyhood were treated, less as life stages in themselves than as rehearsals for womanhood and manhood. Rather than treat girls and women as separate categories, True Love Waits emphasized that the former was a version of the latter still in need of polishing. This subtle shift makes sense in the context of Christian political conservatism's growing emphasis on gender difference and the organization's treatment of the past, the future, and how to get from one to the other.

Like many evangelical summer camps, most True Love Waits activities were coed. Also like summer camps, however, participants were sometimes divided by gender, particularly when it came to small-group Bible studies. Many purity guidebooks advised leaders to decide whether to gender-segregate based on the needs and inclinations of their particular youth group.³⁴⁶ In other cases, the books themselves were either fully gender-specific or segregated within their bindings. The latter was executed in several cases via a flipped style, in which a book had a section for girls printed one way up to the middle of the book; this would be followed by a section for boys printed in the other direction, so that by flipping the book backward and upside

³⁴⁵ Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*, 5.

³⁴⁶ Kelly, *Sexual Resolutions*; Jackson, *Revolutionary Purity*; Hughes, *Living Pure inside Out*.

down a reader could access different materials (a design choice that in itself speaks to the ways gender was seen within the movement).³⁴⁷

In these flippable books, chapter titles and contents on each side of the book - reflected each other in form but not in gender-specific content. 2000's *True Love Waits Takes a Look at Courting, Dating & Hanging Out*, by David Payne, exemplifies this format. For example, both sides contain a chapter titled "Top 10 Lies and Cop-Outs." Some of the lies are rephrased versions of each other ("Any sexual act is okay as long as I don't have intercourse" for girls vs. "I can keep my commitment to virginity by doing everything but intercourse" for boys).³⁴⁸ Others are different in explicitly gendered ways: Lie #7 on the girls' side of the book reads, "The skimpy clothes I wear have nothing to do with the way guys act around me," while the same number on the boys' side reads, "A good way to satisfy sexual urges is by feeding your mind pornography."³⁴⁹ These differences show anticipated issues girls or boys might face based on gendered expectations, showing readers how they were expected to behave—and in this case, to be tempted—based on their gender "wiring."³⁵⁰

Frequently, these materials discuss gender differences as being hardwired, a technological gender metaphor that began to appear in the approach to the new millennium. This understanding tracked with earlier periods' understandings of gender as a given, as with the Pioneer Girls' promotion of strong girlhood as an identity in itself. However, what was new was a focus on innate differences between boys and girls, which were gender identities portrayed as expansive (girls can like football! boys can like baking!) but ultimately possessing some set of

³⁴⁷ E.g., Gibbs and Wakefield, *Complete (Girls)*; Gibbs and Wakefield, *Complete (Boys)*; Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*; Payne, *Courting, Dating (Boys)*.

³⁴⁸ Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*, 13; Payne, *Courting, Dating (Boys)*, 15.

³⁴⁹ Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*, 12; Payne, *Courting, Dating (Boys)*, 12.

³⁵⁰ For reasons unclear, this book also sometimes provides girls' small groups with fewer discussion questions per lesson than it does boys' small groups.

innate characteristics. True Love Waits' pedagogical materials boiled those differences down to boys being sexual and girls being romantic—which, at least until the wedding night, were further characterized as tendencies at odds with each other that must both be kept under control if that longed-awaited wedding night was to be reached.

Regardless of how any individual Bible study group shook out or which style of book they used, one of the things these pedagogical materials taught, whether explicitly or by implication, was that there were God-ordained differences between boys and girls, and that those differences would shape their purity journeys and thereby the futures they created. The gender differences promoted by True Love Waits were deeply tied in with the relationality that is foundational to evangelical practice. One's gender role not only gave a roadmap for how one should act in the world or in relation to others, but even for how one should be a person. Notably, this also applied to the Holy Trinity. While not theologically gendered in the same way these figures are gendered in something like Mormonism, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are throughout materials published by the True Love Waits campaign referred to using masculine pronouns. On one hand, this is not surprising: Jesus was, according to scripture, a man, and despite being noted to have both masculine and feminine characteristics (both in these materials and widely throughout the Christian world), God is commonly referred to throughout Christianity as a "he." Perhaps less commonly emphasized, however, is also calling the Holy Spirit "he," a phenomenon that occurs consistently throughout True Love Waits materials.

One 2006 purity guide, *Revolutionary Purity*, explains why it uses the personal pronoun, though does not discuss why it is gendered: "But the first thing to clear up is that the Holy Spirit is a 'He,' not an 'It,'" the author writes. "He is not some impersonal force... He is the Third

Person of the Trinity.”³⁵¹ In trinitarian theology, God is conceived of as three “persons”: the Father (which is what Christians usually mean when they talk about God), the Son (Jesus, considered God incarnate), and the Holy Spirit (“someone who walks alongside you”³⁵²). Before explaining what the Holy Spirit is, *Revolutionary Purity* explains its pronouns. Though this does point to the heteropatriarchal idea that the default person is male and anyone else is merely modifying that default, it also implies that, in this context, personhood *necessarily* entails gender. The Holy Spirit is a person, and therefore must take a gendered pronoun (perhaps a masculine one to stay consistent with the pronouns of the other aspects of the Trinity). So, too, were the children and teenagers targeted by purity campaigns people who must be gendered accordingly.

Despite promoting the idea that part of being human was being male or female as assigned at birth, the fact remains that all these nostalgic pedagogical materials appeared to teach their users to embody the genders that they in theory should have known by instinct. A need to nevertheless teach young readers proper gender performance is, of course, Butlerian in its acknowledgment that gender *is* something that is learned, regardless of how it is conceived of in any particular community.³⁵³ The way this comes across in *True Love Waits* is related to its temporality, as contemporary feminism was portrayed as disrupting the appropriate gender roles of times past. Further, the campaign employed critical nostalgia to teach girls not how to be girls but rather how to be future women, instructing them in temporally countercultural gender practice now under the guise of giving them a glimpse into their own potential futures.

In keeping with the persistent idea that girls were above all future women, *True Love Waits* often made the case that while female participants were approaching the point in life at

³⁵¹ Jackson, *Revolutionary Purity*, 11.

³⁵² Jackson, 11.

³⁵³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

which their womanhood switch would be flipped, they were not there yet. Participants still had a lot to learn about how to perform the role of womanhood correctly, in part by holding onto the innocence that was an inherent part of girlhood. In fact, *Courting, Dating and Hanging Out* proposed that the girls reading it were *already* women, at least physically: “The real differences are in the amount of experience that someone with more years has and in the amount of hormones released into the body.”³⁵⁴ It was the religious task of girls to steer that experience, particularly their emotional tendencies, in the right direction. For instance, in one purity-guide anecdote that culminates in what the authors characterize as “date-rape” of a fourteen-year-old girl by a twenty-three-year-old man, the violation is presented as a preventable tragedy on the Christian girl’s part: “Gary knew exactly what he wanted from Sarah,” the authors write, “but she romanticized the relationship into something it was not.”³⁵⁵ The narrative ends in an extended exercise asking readers to list the ways Sarah could have steered her thoughts and emotions differently, though Gary’s agency in his crime is not addressed at all, even as the book was aimed at a coed audience.

As this story makes clear, the commitment to gender “wiring” alongside a theoretically expansive idea of what personalities boys and girls could have resulted in some real ambivalence about girls in particular, who ended up being characterized as both independent agents in a manner that should now be familiar and also potential victims in a way that was not an element of previous versions of evangelical girl power. Though girls were occasionally characterized as sexual agents, in particular with regard to tempting boys (whether intentionally or no) with how they dressed, their agency was more often discussed in terms of their ability to resist boys who

³⁵⁴ Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*, 5.

³⁵⁵ Strack and Strack, *Until You Say I Do*, 22.

wanted to go too far, thus preserving their purity for their—to use language from the original True Love Waits pledge—“future mate, and...future children.”³⁵⁶

While much of the concern shown by girl-directed materials was related to keeping girls from giving in to pressure from their boyfriends, they were sometimes warned away from being the problem party, particularly with regard to how they dressed. In a suggested responsive prayer for a True Love Waits worship service published in 2000, students were to pledge in unison to “turn away from anything that would...lead each other away from our commitment to wait.” Boys then specified, “In the plans we make,” followed by girls pledging to do the same “in the way we choose to dress.”³⁵⁷ This is merely a particularly stark example of girls’ unique duty to protect their brothers in Christ by covering up, a part of purity culture that is almost always brought up in discussions of its problems.³⁵⁸ Expectations for girls to control how they dressed were distinct from the kind of self-control taught to boys within the movement, framed as both were by the idea that boys were visually driven actors. True Love Waits presented modesty as an active choice, though it is frequently remembered by former participants as more of a passive submission. But even with the more active characterization, the actions required by girls and boys had different motivations: By covering up, girls prevented the possibility of their being acted upon, thereby protecting both parties’ purity.

Purity as Heterosexual

The evangelical understanding of certain gendered tendencies as hardwired existed side by side with concerns about gender stereotypes. One article from 1975 carefully lays out this

³⁵⁶ “True Love Waits Covenant Card.”

³⁵⁷ *Seize the Net*, 13–14.

³⁵⁸ Emily Joy Allison, “The Weaponization of Modesty,” Broadleaf Books, January 31, 2021, <https://blog.broadleafbooks.com/the-weaponization-of-modesty>; Klein, *Pure*; Rine, “Why Some Evangelicals Are Trying to Stop Obsessing Over Pre-Marital Sex.”

tightrope walk, castigating the society that caused children to internalize gender stereotypes from a young age while also emphasizing that as adults, men possessed “capacities such as leadership, strength, vigor, physical endurance, analytical thinking, and independence,” while women were gifted with “warmth, affection, sensitivity to the needs of others, fellowship [*sic*] and submissiveness”—and that those of each gender must teach these qualities to the other.³⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that the men’s qualities listed here were presented unreservedly as girls’ qualities in the Pioneer Girls, showing how in the 1970s, girlhood was still seen as quite distinct from mature womanhood.

This list of complementary gendered qualities indicates a turn in subsequent decades to what has variously been called “pragmatic egalitarianism,” “mutual submission,” or simply a change in the meaning of “biblical womanhood.”³⁶⁰ Though terminology may differ, all of these describe the tendency among evangelicals to talk about gender in terms of complementary divine “gifts.” The gifts, as in the case above, tend to differ between men and women, but as a collection necessarily inform each other to sacralize heterosexuality in order to create better Christian families. Though different individuals, families, and churches have tended to emphasize different aspects of this dynamic—the emphasis being on, say, the differences of the spiritual gifts versus on the ways that all the gifts are necessary for a spiritually complete household—functionally, the dynamic has most often manifested as a profession to gender difference and simultaneous practice of what just works regardless of how it reflects that theological difference. This can have the effect of making heterosexual dynamics within this

³⁵⁹ Peak and Peak, “Free to Be You and Me,” 19–21.

³⁶⁰ Respectively, Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*; Bartkowski, *Remaking the Godly Marriage*; Griffith, *God’s Daughters*. See also Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*; Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings*; Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*.

framework functionally relatively egalitarian while alleging to exhibit more strict patriarchal power structures.³⁶¹

This is not to say that the popularity of pragmatic egalitarianism did away with patriarchy in white evangelicalism; far from it. What it did do, however, was provide a response to the spread of secular feminism that was wrapped up in longing for a past “biblical womanhood.”³⁶² This form of complementarianism afforded evangelical women a form of gendered power while nevertheless promoting a particular vision of womanhood as morally and spiritually correct.³⁶³ Part of the project of girlhood, then, was once again to learn this mode of womanhood, though now the option of exercising the distinct femininity of girlhood grew less important. It was with the transformation of the meaning of evangelical womanhood that the transformation of girlhood into an experience “wired” with particular emotional tendencies, tendencies the same as those held by women, also took shape. While continuing to promote the girl power evident in previous eras of evangelical girlhood, *True Love Waits* also began explicitly instructing girls that they were feelings-oriented while boys were action-oriented. Consequently, despite deviations here and there, the literature largely reflected the idea that to maintain their purity and arrive at good (married) Christian womanhood, girls must resist the advancements of boys, while it was left to boys to control themselves. Among other lessons, this was good training for the mutual-submission framework in which men were characterized as head of household and women as neck.

One major way evangelical children and (especially) teenagers learned their God-ordained gender roles was spending time with other young people and adults of their own

³⁶¹ Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*; Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings*.

³⁶² Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*.

³⁶³ Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*; Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*.

gender. As in the Pioneer Girls and single-sex summer camp cabins, this was treated as both a natural and age-appropriate inclination and a potential positive force. In the case of the purity movement, homosociality was frequently invoked as a way to maintain accountability and to stay pure (or reclaim a former purity).³⁶⁴ While True Love Waits Bible studies were largely written with both boys and girls in mind, many suggested that leaders divide their youth groups into same-gender small groups for some or all of a given curriculum to provide a setting where “some of the material may be more thoroughly discussed.”³⁶⁵ This gender segregation undoubtedly gave participants an opportunity to be open with peers with whom they shared some life experience; it also opened the door for leaders to instruct them in proper performance of their role. In the case of girls, single-gender small group discussions likely included reinforcement and encouragement of the idea that they were emotion-driven and in need of protection not just for their bodies but also for their hearts. That protection would come, to paraphrase Hochschild, from managing those hearts, controlling their emotions until such a time as their true love came along.³⁶⁶

This approach, of course, assumed that there was no risk of sexual temptation in same-sex groups. In the 1990s and early 2000s, white American evangelicals had largely converged around an anti-LGBTQ ideology informed by the pro-life/pro-family movement.³⁶⁷ By the turn of the millennium, this had become incorporated into the purity movement, with student-facing Bible studies specifying that “homosexuality is a sin and a perversion of sex as God created it” despite being acceptable in “today’s culture.”³⁶⁸ These warnings did not explore what potentially queer students wishing to pursue sexual purity should do beyond not have sex (left undefined);

³⁶⁴ Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*; Hughes, *Living Pure inside Out*.

³⁶⁵ Hughes, *Living Pure inside Out*, 5. See also Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*; Gibbs and Wakefield, *Complete (Girls)*.

³⁶⁶ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

³⁶⁷ Tanya Erzen, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Bjork-James, *The Divine Institution*.

³⁶⁸ Chapman and Rankin, *A Student’s Guide to the Five Love Languages*, 73.

they seem mostly to have functioned as another nostalgic-countercultural guideline. Further, in light of the implication discussed earlier that sex was something men and boys did and something girls and women merely received, romantic and sexual relationships between girls in particular could (and did) fly under the radar in part because on some level they were understood to be impossible.³⁶⁹ Outside of warnings against homosexuality, same-gender relationships were treated exclusively as good and conducive to the pursuit of purity.³⁷⁰ These relationships could be with peers or with adult religious leaders, who received guidelines of their own for having deep conversations about sexual purity with students of their own gender.³⁷¹

The key part of the gender hardwiring taught by True Love Waits was that boys were visually (sexually) driven, and girls were emotionally (romantically) driven. For girls, then, sexual purity also needed to entail *emotional* purity lest feelings of being in love lead to premarital sex and the continued downfall of society. For girls who had never had sex, going too far with romantic feelings did not involve a loss of purity unless a girl gave in to pressure from her boyfriend to have sex, but True Love Waits portrayed it as a slippery slope from one to the other. To stay pure, for girls, meant starting with emotional control. Emotional purity was even more important, though also very different, for non-virgins, more on which below. Ultimately, though both boys and girls were exhorted to exercise self-control in the face of sexual

³⁶⁹ *Exposing Myself, Friend, That Was a Whole Girlfriend* 🤔😏😏😏 #inthecloset #outofthecloset #thatwasgayaf #pansegsual #biseggsual (Pardon the Upcoming Old Sounds, Im Clearing My Drafts as i Get Back on Here), TikTok (thebluntess, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/@thebluntess/video/7248340040814841096>; *Ah Memories* 🥰 #storytime #dramatok #younglife #susistitch, TikTok (whatupwaltz, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/@whatupwaltz/video/7295127336305888555>.

³⁷⁰ One interesting result is the frequent use of David/Jonathan and Ruth/Naomi as examples of friendship—pairs that have for years been lent themselves to queer readings by theologians. See Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1978); Anthony Heacock, *Jonathan Loved David: Manly Love in the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Sex*, Bible in the Modern World 22 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011); Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Robert Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

³⁷¹ See Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*.

temptation, that self-control was expected to look different: boys needed to focus on not acting on their physical urges, while girls needed to work on keeping their emotions in check.³⁷² While both approaches were ultimately practice-oriented, only for girls did feelings come into it.

An exception was for people who had already had sex: for them, emotional purity was important regardless of gender. Though True Love Waits presented the collective past as morally superior, from the beginning it also left room for regrettable individual pasts. These pasts, in which an individual committed some sexual transgression, were treated within the campaign with ambivalence but ultimately offered an opportunity for individuals to enact the same kind of redemption that True Love Waits aimed to perform upon the world.³⁷³ Though such individual redemption has frequently been called “born-again virginity” outside of the movement, in the 1990s and early 2000s it was more likely to be discussed in terms of fresh promises, second chances, and forgiveness.³⁷⁴

Nearly every purity guide and Bible study published through True Love Waits included a section on how to proceed if the reader had been sexually active in the past. This section was typically set apart from the rest of the text, indicating the program’s general orientation toward *preserving* virginity into the future—a kind of nostalgia for the innocence of childhood that those who had had sex were encouraged to feel all the more for having lost it. Here, though, I will

³⁷² See Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*. Girls’ emotional control will be discussed further in the next chapter.

³⁷³ See Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy*.

³⁷⁴ For the former, see Janet E. Rosenbaum, “Reborn a Virgin: Adolescents’ Retracting of Virginity Pledges and Sexual Histories,” *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 6 (June 2006): 1098–1103, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2005.063305>; Heather Rachelle White, “Virgin Pride: Born Again Faith and Sexual Identity in the Faith-Based Abstinence Movement,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Contemporary Religion and Sexuality*, ed. Stephen Hunt and Andrew K. T. Yip (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 241–53; “Born-Again Virgin,” in *Wikipedia*, February 12, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Born-again_virgin&oldid=1138999264. For the latter, see Karen Dockrey, “Family Worship Plan” (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, ca 1994), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives; D. Tony Rankin and Richard Ross, *When True Love Doesn’t Wait* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 1998); Gibbs and Wakefield, *Complete (Girls)*; Hester, *Introduction to True Love Waits*.

focus on a guide written specifically for those who had already had sex, aptly titled *When True Love Doesn't Wait*.³⁷⁵ First published in 1998 and reissued regularly through at least 2009, the 32-page booklet was produced in the hopes that adults would give copies to youth in their lives. Suggested recipients included youth group members and young relatives, but also “employees,” “health care patients,” and “counselees,” signaling the movement’s far-reaching redemptive goals and attention to the broader topic of sex education in the U.S.³⁷⁶

When True Love Doesn't Wait does not display the kind of nostalgia evident in the majority of purity materials that target those who had never had sex. While it does show a relationship with the past, that relationship is strained and, on the whole, more in line with the born-again narratives renouncing a sinful personal past that comprise evangelicalism’s core narrative. Rather than promising a clean break from the past, the pamphlet emphasizes that “sin does have consequences” but that “this book will guide you as you move through those consequences” and find “a wonderful future.”³⁷⁷ Instead of warning about those consequences—though it also does that—the booklet works on the assumption that its reader is already aware of and experiencing them and looking for a way out in order to join their pure peers in building a brighter future. Despite the emphasis the campaign placed on virginity writ large, *When True Love Doesn't Wait* claims that “an emotional virginity is even more precious and important to have when you marry.”³⁷⁸ Using critical nostalgia, readers could bring their own past virginities into the present.

³⁷⁵ Rankin and Ross, *When True Love Doesn't Wait*.

³⁷⁶ D. Tony Rankin and Richard Ross, “When True Love Doesn't Wait Promotional Folder” (LifeWay, 1998), AR 795-24 True Love Waits, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

³⁷⁷ Rankin and Ross, *When True Love Doesn't Wait*, 1.

³⁷⁸ Rankin and Ross, 16.

Tellingly, the distinction between physical and emotional virginity was only made in discussions around those who had already been sexually active and does not seem to have been considered something for the never-sexually active to think about. Emotional virginity differed slightly from the emotional purity taught to virgins in that it entailed not only emotional self-control but also a *recommitment* to not acting on emotions, and that it was an option for both boys and girls in the absence of an ability to claim “physical” virginity. It is possible that the program considered those who had never been sexually active to not need to think about the finer distinctions between categories of virginity, being that their physical state had not changed. But *True Love Waits* still wanted to include those who wanted to recommit to chastity after having had a change of heart, though they were still described mostly in terms of cautionary tales, a tendency that ended up portraying so-called secondary virginity as a second-place prize. The emotional virginity distinction offered a way to reclaim emotional and spiritual aspects of past “physical virginity” under present circumstances.

As critics have noted, the topic of what was being called physical virginity was a tricky one in these discussions: sex between people, as well as masturbation (a topic not examined in girl-specific materials), counted as a violation of physical virginity, but sexual violation itself was not.³⁷⁹ “If you were forced to have sex,” notes *When True Love Doesn’t Wait*, “you did not lose your virginity... Virginity is more of a mind-set and an attitude of purity than it is a physical feature.”³⁸⁰ This sentiment was echoed in passing in other purity materials, though as here it was rarely elaborated upon.³⁸¹ In this particular booklet, the brief discussion of sexual assault is followed by encouragement to avoid associations with previous sex partners as a first step to

³⁷⁹ Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010); Evans, “Elizabeth Smart, Human Trafficking, and Purity Culture”; Klein, *Pure*.

³⁸⁰ Rankin and Ross, *When True Love Doesn’t Wait*, 17.

³⁸¹ E.g., Hester, *Introduction to True Love Waits*, 24–25.

renewed virginity, without any segue between one topic and the other. Such responsibility-shifting is not unique to *True Love Doesn't Wait*: recall the tale of twenty-three-year-old Gary and fourteen-year-old Sarah, which was presented as a tragedy that could have been prevented by Sarah not associating herself with Gary in the first place.³⁸² The ideas of re-commitment to virginity and the ambiguously presented responsibilities around sexual assault left the idea of virginity in an odd place, characterized as always emotional for girls and sometimes emotional for boys, but not always physical, and able to be reclaimed even in situations where it was never lost in the first place. Whether intentionally or not, this mostly reinforced the idea of virginity as an object of critical nostalgia: if someone wasn't sure they were a virgin, it was best to treat it as something past and to commit to renewed virginity, just in case.

The motivations given for commitment or recommitment to abstinence included avoidance of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, as well as biblical directive. But the main reason the organization urged participants to avoid sex before marriage was there in its name: True Love Waits. Girls in the movement were encouraged to wait for their true love, whom they would without question marry and only then become sexually active; they were also encouraged to keep themselves pure so that they could *be* that person's true love, worthy of waiting for. I have discussed throughout this work the ways in which white American evangelicalism is fundamentally relational, and here is another example: while purity could exist on its own, it was most important in relation to a future spouse, and abstinence was promised to eventually come to a godly end. Purity was thus a religious practice that served to reinforce evangelical webs of relationship by situating them in time.

³⁸² Strack and Strack, *Until You Say I Do*, 20–27.

Nostalgia for a Purer Time

Personal pasts (past virginity, past girlhood, appreciation of one's own past purity) have been the focus of much of this chapter, but like earlier evangelical youth phenomena, the biblical past also loomed large. Emphasis on the traits of certain biblical figures throughout the pedagogical materials published by True Love Waits was reflective of the nostalgia for strong moral communities found in the Pioneer Girls and the evangelical summer camp project. This time, though, the theme was more specific, with the focus on the idea that sexual purity was, on the whole, easier to maintain then than now. This was made explicit in a study guide from 2002, in a discussion around the perils of going too far sexually even before having sex. In biblical times, the text points out, “[p]eople went from seeing each other clothed head-to-toe to being married,” and as a consequence the Bible does not have much to say on how far is too far.³⁸³ However, this was not written about as a problem. Rather, the approach of avoiding most, or all, romantic physical contact is presented as an ideal way to avoid temptation altogether, which could further prepare the reader for marriage and help them build relationships on a spiritual foundation. The romantic practices of biblical times, in this line of thinking, were ripe for revival in the present.

As in previous decades, materials from the purity movement showed an interest in the early church and in Old Testament figures that went beyond scriptural exegesis. Purity guides for both students and adult leaders worked to efface the difference between then and now, emphasizing that the early church was not so different from today and that current Christians should emulate aspects of the lives of early ones. As discussed in previous chapters, this did not necessarily mean framing the Bible as timeless (though these materials certainly did that, too),

³⁸³ Hughes, *Living Pure inside Out*, 53.

but instead referring to elements of a specific past that should be restored in contradistinction to the mores of the present.

In this case, the purity movement was largely focused on the singular goal of preventing unmarried people from having sex, so the aspects of the past to be restored were accordingly specific. One early True Love Waits pamphlet, citing Acts 15:29, claims, “Sexual purity was one of the few things the early church insisted on for every Christian.”³⁸⁴ Though the other few things—largely centered on kosher food practices—are reprinted in the pamphlet, they are not addressed in the commentary. While purity within the early church may have comprised a collection of specific bodily practices inherited from Judaism, it was just one component of those practices that was important here, and thus just the one component that was important to restore to contemporary American culture.

Other scholars have also explored, and at greater length, the tendency within evangelicalism to elevate certain portions of scripture while downplaying others as consistent with a professed ideology of literalism; True Love Waits’ exegesis also participated in an even longer Christian interpretive tradition of reading abstinence into the Bible.³⁸⁵ I wish to draw out the nostalgic implications of these choices. As True Love Waits presented it, sexual purity worked as an embodied connection to biblical times that, like camping in the wilderness, bypassed the accretions of tradition to instead form a direct temporal link between the ages of the patriarchs, of Jesus, and of the early apostles and the present. (Perhaps this commitment to the past and concomitant rejection of practices thought of as merely tradition is one of the many

³⁸⁴ Hester, *Introduction to True Love Waits*, 10.

³⁸⁵ For the former, see Bielo, *Words upon the Word*; Malley, *How the Bible Works*; Samuel L. Perry and Joshua B. Grubbs, “Formal or Functional? Traditional or Inclusive? Bible Translations as Markers of Religious Subcultures,” *Sociology of Religion* 81, no. 3 (July 20, 2020): 319–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sraa003>. For the latter, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

reasons the kosher portions of the verse are ignored as things members of the early church also agreed were important.)

Though they frequently cited Acts and the letters of Paul, purity guides for students more often returned to a few biblical figures, all from the Old Testament and far predating the early church: Adam and Eve, Rebekah, Joseph, and David. Where Adam and Eve were brought up, it was nearly always in the context of what marriage should look like. Early True Love Waits promotional materials pointed repeatedly to Genesis 2:23-25 (when man and woman become “one flesh”) as an example of what sexual purity within marriage meant.³⁸⁶ As the decade went on and the movement for same-sex marriage gained steam, these figures were upheld more frequently as a specific reason for biblical marriage being heterosexual as the words “husband and wife” became more prominent alongside discussions of why homosexuality was a sin.³⁸⁷

Rebekah, as she was for the Pioneer Girls decades prior, was employed largely as a model of the kind of woman girls should aspire to be when they grew up, as in one guide from 1997: “Her family and spiritual background were the most important criteria... The girl was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever lain with her.”³⁸⁸ Unlike with the Pioneer Girls, however, this guide was aimed at a coed audience, so these qualities were described not only as things girls should embody in the corrupted modern world but also as traits boys should look for in a future wife as proof that she was chosen by God. In this case, the story led into an exercise in which students made a list of qualities they wanted in a spouse, which they were instructed to pray over and revise regularly over the years. Though this exercise was again coed, coming as it did after a story in which only the traits desirable in a woman were discussed (and just before an instruction

³⁸⁶ Dockrey, “Family Worship Plan”; Dockrey, “Church Worship Plan.”

³⁸⁷ See, e.g., Gibbs and Wakefield, *Complete (Girls)*; Chapman and Rankin, *A Student’s Guide to the Five Love Languages*.

³⁸⁸ Strack and Strack, *Until You Say I Do*, 67.

to have “true respect for your girlfriend”),³⁸⁹ the effect is an implication that while boys could ensure a Godly future by selecting a wife with biblical traits, it was girls who were truly responsible for that future by embodying the countercultural past.

In pedagogical materials, Joseph largely appeared in the context of his encounter with Potiphar’s nameless wife. In the story, the future patriarch is sold by his brothers and enslaved in the home of Potiphar, a captain in the Egyptian army whose wife is known for her infidelities. The wife attempts to seduce Joseph, who resists and runs off, whereupon Potiphar’s wife accuses Joseph of raping her. Joseph is sent to prison, where he becomes famous for dream interpretation and eventually becomes a high-level administrator for the Egyptian state. Unsurprisingly, True Love Waits employed this story as an example of the rewards that come to those who resist sexual temptation and the differences between those who wait and those who do not. “Joseph was a teenager of great devotion,” write the authors of one 1997 Bible study to their teenage readers. “While Joseph’s brothers partied and planned their evil, Joseph was praying.”³⁹⁰

True Love Waits’ favorite role model by far, though (at least based on frequency of appearances), was David, who appeared primarily in two contexts, one a cautionary tale and one an aspirational one: his relationship with Bathsheba, and his friendship with Jonathan. In the former, David is king of Israel and becomes “consumed with lust” for Bathsheba, who is married to another man. He has sex with her, has her husband killed, and marries Bathsheba, though as punishment for their sins their firstborn child dies. (Another of their children, Solomon, becomes another legendary king of Israel, but this is often glossed over in the True Love Waits version of the story.) After David repents, God forgives him, “but he and Bathsheba suffered the

³⁸⁹ Strack and Strack, 68.

³⁹⁰ Strack and Strack, 66.

consequences of their sin for life.”³⁹¹ One of these consequences, according to the authors of one manual, was God preventing David from building the temple. Most sources attribute this to the overall amount of bloodshed during David’s reign, but here a direct line was drawn between the temple and David’s giving in to temptation.

The lesson here imparted the same message as *When True Love Doesn’t Wait*: if you have sex and repent, God will forgive you, but your life—and your purity—will never be the same.³⁹² Some guides glossed over the murder of Bathsheba’s husband and David’s possible sex crimes to emphasize the loss of purity. Others discussed the murder as a consequence itself, as in 2002’s *Living Pure Inside and Out*, which equates David’s looking at Bathsheba to contemporary pornography and makes the case that it was this porn-adjacent behavior that led to the murder.³⁹³ More aspirationally, an earlier, pre-kinghood (and pre-marriage) version of David is also used in these materials as a good example of the homosociality that was alleged to encourage appropriate gender behavior and accountability for purity. His relationship with Jonathan, the son of David’s royal predecessor King Saul, is held up as “the companionship of true friends,” a form of love outside of the romantic.³⁹⁴

Unlike the example of Rebekah, the stories about Joseph and David did not necessarily aim to induce nostalgia for biblical times. I include them here to illustrate the ways True Love Waits reshaped familiar stories to emphasize the importance of its primary focus, sexual abstinence. Working in the tradition of early Christian ascetics, True Love Waits took individual verses and stories out of their original temporal and social context in order to present them as

³⁹¹ Strack and Strack, 18.

³⁹² Rankin and Ross, *When True Love Doesn’t Wait*.

³⁹³ Hughes, *Living Pure inside Out*, 41–43. The story also appears in Chapman and Rankin, *A Student’s Guide to the Five Love Languages*, 11.

³⁹⁴ Chapman and Rankin, *A Student’s Guide to the Five Love Languages*, 12.

indicative that sexual abstinence was at the heart of Christianity. As Elizabeth Clark has noted, the early ascetics created a mode of Biblical meaning-making through interpretation that remains central to Christianity: “If every verse of Scripture was deemed meaningful, authoritative, and therefore unalterable and incapable of rejection,” she writes, “hermeneutical strategies had to be devised to provide satisfactory explanations of apparent Scriptural divergences” — namely, in the case of both the ascetics and True Love Waits, to account for the apparent sparseness of biblical content that explicitly advocates abstinence.³⁹⁵ By reading abstinence into the Bible, True Love Waits could name it as a characteristic of an idealized past and ripe for counterculturally bringing back in order to redeem the present and future. Such strategies remain central for evangelicalism in particular as a way to insist upon the idea of biblical literalism and of the Bible speaking to each reader individually rather than being situated in a particular place, time, and language.³⁹⁶

For the early ascetics, the abstinence being read into the Bible as a whole was lifelong; it was a commitment with no end point. For True Love Waits, though, abstinence was intended to last until marriage—followers were expected, definitionally, to wait for something, not refrain forever. This key difference may explain the curious absence in True Love Waits materials of the second-most consequential virgin (after Jesus) in scripture: Mary. Like the teen girls in the True Love Waits imaginary, Mary is transformed suddenly from a girl into a woman with no discussion of a transitional period, and she is additionally a major figure in other Christian abstinence traditions. One explanation for her absence could be that those traditions are mostly

³⁹⁵ Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 10.

³⁹⁶ See Bielo, *Words upon the Word*; Malley, *How the Bible Works*; Samuel L Perry, “What Arouses Evangelicals? Cultural Schemas, Interpretive Prisms, and Evangelicals’ Divergent Collective Responses to Pornography and Masturbation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 3 (September 7, 2019): 693–724, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfz024>.

Catholic, a group with which white American evangelicals have long had a complicated relationship. Another explanation could be that as an organization working against teen pregnancy, the story of a teenage girl impregnated by the Holy Spirit before wedlock may have complicated the discussion. Most crucially, though, the adult woman Mary is commonly understood through the lens of virginity (“the virgin Mary”) regardless of any one tradition’s beliefs about that virginity’s perpetuity. *True Love Waits*, on the other hand, promoted a godly end to followers’ virginities; its interpretive hermeneutics, then, emphasized the stories of figures like David, Ruth, and Rebekah whose primary or secondary virginities notably ended with marriage, and downplayed those of Mary and other figures like Paul whose virginity and asceticism were more central to their stories.

In addition to biblical and personal nostalgia, nostalgia for a less-defined past in which purity was easier is also evident in *True Love Waits* materials. One of its most visible manifestations was the promotion of courtship as an alternative to dating. Courtship first saw popularity among evangelical Christians with Joshua Harris’s *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, published in 1997, and achieved further cultural prominence with the pop-cultural rise of the Duggar family, conservative Christians who starred in several reality television shows and specials about their marriage-and-reproduction-focused religious lives, shortly thereafter.³⁹⁷ Though courtship could come across as a dramatic subcultural departure from secular dating norms—an understanding no doubt reinforced by such high-profile practitioners as the *19-Kids-and-Counting* Duggars—promoters insisted it was merely a return to older practices and values that would benefit those who participated and, by extension, the world.

³⁹⁷ Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*; Elizabeth L. Shively, *Patriarchal Lineages in 21st-Century Christian Courtship: First Comes Marriage* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49622-7>. Both of these stories made headlines when Harris renounced his work and when Joshua Duggar was convicted of sexual assault for molesting underage girls, including four of his sisters.

Courtship in the evangelical context was (and is) described as a marriage-and-family-oriented alternative to dating, in which a prospective couple sought parental permission to spend time together and, once that permission was given, never did so alone. Some courting couples took this further and did not touch each other until they were engaged or married. Though this bears some resemblance to contemporary courtship practices in other religious groups, promotional materials rarely made the comparison to, say, Orthodox Judaism or conservative Islam. Instead, they pointed to the Christian past: *True Love Waits Takes a Look at Courting, Dating & Hanging Out* takes pains to assure potential courters that courtship is not some new fad but is, in fact, “almost as old as the Bible!”³⁹⁸ Courtship, then, represented the rare element of purity culture that was explicitly backward-looking, not only oriented around building a particular future but drawing on a specific past to do so. It thus makes the other nostalgias around purity culture and *True Love Waits* more legible.

Despite courtship’s firm anchoring in the past, the aforementioned guide from *True Love Waits* emphasized that courtship was not outdated or uncool. “Courtship is becoming more and more mainstream,” the text claimed before even explaining what courtship, exactly, was. “You don’t have to be a member of some strange religious sect. People who court rarely end up wearing a black Amish hat with a long beard.”³⁹⁹ Rather, the text conveyed, courtship was simply a way to make it easier to stick to one’s purity goals—as easy as it was in the idealized past, before mainstream culture became more sexualized. The note of humor here also throws light on the difference between evangelical critical nostalgia, which focuses on bringing particular practices from the past into the present, and the more full-on restorative nostalgia of groups like the Amish. The elevation of courtship as an ideal spoke to the evangelical critical-

³⁹⁸ Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*, 19.

³⁹⁹ Payne, 20.

nostalgic dream of using practices from the past to ultimately create a new version of the invented past Christian America discussed in previous chapters: courtship represented not a retreat into the past but a way to use the past to bring about a desired future. By emphasizing that courtship was increasingly mainstream (at least within the counterculture that was evangelical Christianity), *True Love Waits* also emphasized the critical-nostalgic, in-the-world-not-of-the-world goals of the practice while downplaying just how unusual it actually was.

As indicated by the title of the book in which this explanation appears, *True Love Takes a Look at Courting, Dating, & Hanging Out*, the campaign presented courtship as one end of a spectrum of practices that also included dating and “hanging out.” While all three are listed as viable options, the ways they are discussed indicate a clear order of preference on the part of the authors, with hanging out (testing out romantic feelings while among friends) sitting in the middle. However, though courtship is here presented as ideal, promoting it was a recent development even within the SBC. In a pamphlet published for teenagers by the denomination in 1981, dating is described as “a way of building meaningful relationships with the opposite sex... Dating may not be the best way or the only way, but it’s the most usual process by which American boys and girls get to know one another.”⁴⁰⁰ Though this guide showed the same ambivalence around the idea of dating that *Courting, Dating...* did, it operated on the assumption that readers would date because that was what normal American teenagers did. In a revision from 1983, the pamphlet showed more enthusiasm for dating, describing it as “a way in which a person begins to prepare to choose a husband or wife,” but also “providing enjoyment and spice to life. Dating just for the fun of it is an acceptable reason for having dates.”⁴⁰¹ Similar language

⁴⁰⁰ “Dating” (Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1981), AR 140, box 6, folder 11, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

⁴⁰¹ “Dating” (Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1983), AR 140, box 6, folder 11, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

was used in a new edition of the pamphlet from 1993, the year True Love Waits began.⁴⁰² The inclusion of “those I date” in the original pledge’s list of accountable parties makes sense in this context as it was assumed that those pledging purity were, in fact, dating as part of being normal teenagers.

Soon, though, “those I date” was replaced with “my friends.” A church worship plan from around 1994 suggests that the inclusion of the former was because “sex before marriage always hurts people,” and those most at risk were those who were already dating, while another worship plan, citing the same reasoning, included “those you date” under the larger category of friends.⁴⁰³ Five years later, a True Love Waits Bible study gave examples of those included in the pledge, which had by now fully shifted to “my friends” language. Here, friends were treated as those who could help teenagers maintain their purity, while those they dated were cast in the role of tempters who may cause their downfall.⁴⁰⁴ By bringing back a past practice such as courting, participants could theoretically prevent that downfall—and forestall the greater downfall of society—by minimizing the risk of temptation.

Courtship was, ultimately, more in line with the future-nostalgic thinking around gender and sexuality that True Love Waits promoted as counterculture. Thinking about opposition to the secular mainstream in temporal and relational terms offers a new way to understand the common phrase “in the world, but not of the world.” Looked at from a critical-nostalgic standpoint, this ethos renders evangelicals as time travelers, experiencing the present as citizens of the past. For True Love Waits, the present they worked against was one of rampant sexual immorality that signaled a greater evil working its way through society. The anticipated future was one where

⁴⁰² “Dating” (Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1993), AR 140, box 6, folder 12, Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives.

⁴⁰³ Dockrey, “Church Worship Plan”; “Church Worship Ideas.”

⁴⁰⁴ Kelly, *Sexual Resolutions*, 27.

sexual purity would be the norm, the result of pledges made by the youth of today. And those pledges drew on ideals of the past—in contrast to the allegedly sexually open ideals of the present—to envision that future.

Instructed to preserve their innocence—a feature of childhood—in order to dispose of it at the proper moment on the wedding night, youth pursuing purity learned to create current selves who would be worthy of nostalgia by their future selves. Moreover, this nostalgia-inflected temporal positioning was accomplished in large part by treating them primarily as future gendered adults, a move particularly true for the feminine side of the movement. This characterization stands in contrast to the girlhoods explored in previous chapters: where before girls were taught that girlhood and womanhood were basically discrete phenomena, the purity movement turned that on its head, presenting girls as pre-women with a responsibility to preserve themselves for the future. This attitude continues among evangelicals in the present, when girlhood is an ever-expanding category that has come to cover any woman who is not yet married, and when girls chafe against the emotional control expected of them as good Christian girls.

Chapter 4: #Christiangirls and Future Women

“We’re Christian girls,” the young woman in the TikTok video says. “We’re not looking for a Christian boy. We’re waiting for a man of God.”⁴⁰⁵

“We say we want to be a Proverbs 31 woman, even if we sleep through our *three* alarms.”

“We’re looking for our Boaz.”

The recent “We’re Christian Girls” TikTok meme is direct in its exploration of what being a Christian (read: evangelical) girl means, using an expansive form of “girl” to refer to those up to their mid-twenties or marriage and building on a popular “we’re (insert identity category here)” format. Largely created by young women either addressing younger girls, presenting themselves as still girls, or both, these videos come from within evangelicalism and show how expansive the category of “girl” has become. Evangelical girls in the present day, it would seem, remain girls until they are married, relying on a notion of nostalgic biblical womanhood to shape who they will become in the absence of any biblical girlhood to shape who they are now.

This tendency in pedagogical materials—and I do count things created by online influencers as pedagogical—marks a continuation of both the 1990s turn toward girl-as-pre-woman and Bible nostalgia specifically directed at the Old Testament. This chapter looks to more recent purity guides, influencer videos from TikTok and YouTube, and interviews with

⁴⁰⁵ *Were Christian Girls! Xoxo, Your Sister in Christ!* ❤️ #christian #fyp #christiangirl #christiangirls #christianitytiktok #christianity #humor #funny #comedy #skit #christianmemes, TikTok (ashleyheterington, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/@ashleyheterington/video/7308512576621661470>.

seven evangelical girls from across the United States to see how the history traced in the previous chapters has created the evangelical girlhood of the present.

The pedagogical materials I discuss in this chapter do not necessarily teach girls how to be girls in the manner of the Pioneer Girls or even earlier Baptist writings on gender. Those earlier materials treated girls within evangelicalism as a distinct category of people who could make the gradual shift to womanhood beginning with puberty, although this seems to have been understood as a years-long process. By now, however, the shift—at least in pedagogical materials—is marked as more sudden and definite, happening at either puberty or marriage depending on the source. This has resulted in the continuation of girlhood being conceptualized more as a period of preparation and passing-through on the way to womanhood, as well as a site of nostalgia for a freedom and innocence that exists firmly in the past but may be brought piecemeal, critical nostalgia-style, into the present.

The TikTok Christian girlie (to use emic terminology) defines herself against what she perceives other girls to be and do, embodying the countercultural religious ideal taught to her from a young age; the same is often true for girls not performing for the internet. Frequent references to biblical figures whom girls in white evangelicalism wish to emulate position them against implied role models of the modern day, presenting the nostalgic approach as the countercultural and therefore right one.

The Pedagogy of Influencers

To explore modern evangelical girlhood and its relationship with time, I examine here two recent purity guides published through the True Love Waits (now True Love Project) campaign explored the last chapter. Additionally, I interviewed seven girls currently active in evangelical youth groups in order to understand what they make of the messages they receive.

But in large part, this chapter focuses on a novel collection of media: the variety of online videos created by and/or directed at evangelical girls. (The introduction to this dissertation contains details on my methodology.)

In the early days of research on digital religion, Christopher Helland made a useful distinction between “online religion” (religious websites with a high degree of interactivity) and “religion online” (websites that mostly dispensed information *about* religion).⁴⁰⁶ As more and more life has moved online, however, the distinction began to fall out of use thanks to the idea that online uses of religion are simply an integrated part of religious life, as Heidi Campbell has pointed out.⁴⁰⁷ The prominence of influencers on evangelical TikTok, while yet another example of syncretism, is also notable as an example of the way that, as Travis Warren Cooper has put it, evangelicals use media to “restructure religious authority.”⁴⁰⁸ This is, of course, how evangelicals have always used media, but Cooper notes that the internet’s “horizontalizing effects,” which go some way toward leveling the playing field between traditional religious authorities and laypeople participating in the conversation, make that restructuring particularly profound online.⁴⁰⁹ On TikTok, where many of the videos examined here are found, that horizontalizing is even more profound as users are algorithmically served videos based on their demonstrated interests, without even having to seek out particular religious authorities to follow.

In previous chapters, I showed that girlhood in evangelicalism has largely historically been considered a stage in life that one at least begins to exit around puberty, an idea that the

⁴⁰⁶ Christopher Helland, “Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet,” *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 2005, <https://doi.org/10.11588/rel.2005.1.380>, 1.

⁴⁰⁷ Heidi A Campbell, “Looking Backwards and Forwards at the Study of Digital Religion,” *Religious Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (2024): 83–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.17062>.

⁴⁰⁸ Travis Warren Cooper, *The Digital Evangelicals: Contesting Authority and Authenticity after the New Media Turn* (Place of publication not identified: Indiana University Press, 2022), 3.

⁴⁰⁹ Cooper, *Digital Evangelicals*, 6.

purity movement of the 1990s recharacterized as a sudden rather than a gradual process. The previous chapters were not able to look much at the audiences for these materials, so it is unclear how much girls bought into these different models through the years. Here, however, is a collection of current and recent evangelical girls, all identifying as such. And here, the implication is that girlhood lasts until marriage and, one imagines, motherhood and the passing of the baton to the next generation. Just as Christian womanhood is framed throughout pedagogical materials as generational, girlhood can be, too.

As with the archival materials discussed in previous chapters, I focused most of my efforts in the digital space on the pedagogy of evangelical girlhood: adults teaching girls how to be, although in this case the adults are also laying claim to girlhood themselves. As with the archives, this is in part because children and teenagers are simply more difficult to find on public platforms than are adults speaking to them. Adding to this is the uncertainty of people's ages on the internet. While someone may claim to be a young person, this may be a lie. For videos purporting to feature teens with public accounts, I only analyzed those from either church youth groups or creators whose ages could be ascertained or at least confidently estimated based on factors including their other videos, media profiles, and their other social media pages, which are often linked in their user descriptions. In discussing comments on videos, I was a bit more generous since many commenters on both TikTok and YouTube do not actually post videos themselves and thus provide limited information. If a commenter stated their age, I took them at their word. I assume that commenters stating that they relate to a video are either reliable reporters of their own experience or otherwise are at least aiming to fake a normative experience of evangelical girlhood—which in its promotion of normativity is, as with the fictional teens who appear in archival materials, still pedagogically valuable.

As a consequence of my choices, many of the videos discussed here, on both TikTok and YouTube, were created by professional influencers with varying degrees of successful monetization. Like the books and organizational materials covered in previous chapters, these influencers do not necessarily represent traditionally defined girls but instead serve as teachers instructing those girls in normative evangelical girlhood. The difference between influencers and the maybe-real-maybe-not girls featured in earlier periods' archival materials, however, is that though they are often heavily mediated, the influencers are or, in most cases, were at one time girls living the experiences they teach and joke about. They more explicitly teach from their lives, often showing a nostalgia for their own girlhoods while also acknowledging to their viewers that girlhood is hard and offering ways to make it better. Even the older creators characterize themselves as girls, striving for a biblical womanhood that they have not yet reached, it seems, because they have not yet married.

TikTok, an app popular among teens and young adults, focuses primarily on short-form video filmed on phones. A hallmark of the platform is the ability to remix videos, using the same audio clip to underscore different posts or “stitching” someone else’s video to one’s own in order to respond to it. This has led to a large number of meme formats that provide a common vernacular for subcultures, including evangelical girls, to explain themselves and make connections. To find relevant TikTok videos, I searched hashtags such as #christiangirl, #youthgroup, and #christiancheck.⁴¹⁰ To find YouTube videos relevant to this project, I searched keywords including “Christian girl” and “Christian teen,” selecting for deeper analysis videos with high viewer numbers from female Christian influencers whose work directly addresses the

⁴¹⁰ Margaret Hamm and Kate Hoeting, “#ChristianCheck: TikTok and the Construction of Generation Z Faith,” *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 12, no. 1 (July 26, 2023): 5–29, <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-bja10088>.

girls in whom the present work is most interested. A look at those and more keywords and hashtags yields a variety of videos that largely come from three types of creators: current Christian teenagers presenting their own experiences; current youth ministers presenting their experiences with youth, as well as advice for other ministers; and female adult evangelical influencers who refer to themselves as girls. All three are revealing in their own ways about what evangelical girls mean, what it feels like to be one, and how they are situated in time.

As most videos on TikTok are under a minute, the platform's content is largely light and often silly, with a heavy emphasis on life tips, routines (beauty, morning, "get ready with me"), and comedy.⁴¹¹ Evangelical-oriented TikToks are no different, and evidence a strong satiric bent addressing perceived stereotypes or cultural in-jokes, sometimes participating in trends popular across TikTok at the same time. One video from a Christian youth worker purports to be a clapback to those who think "Christian girl modest outfits are so ugly," but then goes on to show pictures of her as a teenager in oversized shirts, baggy pants, and even a Teletubby costume.⁴¹² The comments, which seem to be largely from girls and women who relate to the sentiment, call the outfits "iconic," "perfect," and "Christian girl core." Another popular account with what appears to be a large audience of girls features a male Christian influencer playing a character variously labeled "the arrogant guy" at youth group, the "cocky church greeter," or simply "that one guy at church," making light of a type of person his audience is assumed to know, one who uses youth group and church activities to posture and try to pick up girls.⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ Laura Ceci, "TikTok Video Duration by Views 2023," Statista, November 13, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1372569/tiktok-video-duration-by-number-of-views/>.

⁴¹² *Ugly Where?* 🤔🤔🤔💯, TikTok (yasminbragatto, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/@yasminbragatto/video/7253290098354146602>.

⁴¹³ Caleb Huffman, "Caleb Huffman (@caleb.Huf)," TikTok, accessed January 16, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@caleb.huf?lang=en>.

On the other hand, YouTube, the internet’s largest video-hosting site, features videos of all lengths and is much more varied in the style of its content.⁴¹⁴ YouTube’s user demographics are just as varied, but what is important for my purposes is that the site is far and away the most popular social media platform among American teenagers.⁴¹⁵ Like TikTok, YouTube is (rather notoriously) algorithmically driven, serving viewers video recommendations based on what they have watched already.⁴¹⁶ This algorithmic viewing style has been shown to reinforce discrete subcultural identities and to promote certain kinds of performance within those identities.⁴¹⁷ As a result, evangelical YouTube showed potential to demonstrate pedagogy around the kind of normative white Christian girlhood I have explored throughout this work.

Not as space-limited or frantic as TikTok, the site is more likely to host longer, more conversational videos from influencers directly addressing their young audiences. The influencers I look at from YouTube are young women, though they started their channels in high school and college; they teach their audiences, who are understood to be evangelical girls and women their own age and younger, about how to be good Christian girls using a big-sister tone and an approach not unlike those of the women “Bible teachers” about whom Kate Bowler has written.⁴¹⁸

Across printed materials and videos, I consider pedagogical utility, which is even present in videos published by girls in the target audience demographic. The books I analyze are, of course, the most explicitly pedagogical and most traditionally authoritative, being that they

⁴¹⁴ Laura Ceci, “YouTube - Statistics & Facts,” Statista, February 16, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/topics/2019/youtube/>.

⁴¹⁵ Anderson, Faverio, and Gottfried, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023.”

⁴¹⁶ Lauren Valentino Bryant, “The YouTube Algorithm and the Alt-Right Filter Bubble,” *Open Information Science* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 85–90, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opis-2020-0007>.

⁴¹⁷ Sophie Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm,” *Convergence* 24, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736978>.

⁴¹⁸ Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife*.

contain specific lessons, discussion questions, and writing exercises, but even jokey videos on stereotypes of evangelical femininity do their part to teach viewers what evangelical femininity should look like, and to teach a nostalgia for past femininity to then bring it into the present. A video posted by a female Christian influencer, whatever else it may be, is also instructive in normative gender performance, and demonstrates how to incorporate those norms as a practice of everyday life.⁴¹⁹ The practice of individuating cultural norms, it is important to note, need not necessarily mean resisting or subverting them, an important thing to keep in mind when discussing girls as independent religious subjects.⁴²⁰ Additionally, by their nature as pedagogical materials, these archives are also usefully considered through Bourdieu's theory of distinction, wherein good taste can mean different things for different groups, and is often determined by influential people—indeed, *influencers*—within those groups.⁴²¹

TikTok and YouTube videos from youth pastors, Christian influencers, and former and current evangelical girls themselves vary in their pedagogical deliberateness: many purport to simply show the creators' experiences even as the term “influencer” makes an instructive pose to some degree inevitable. Though girls' own public TikTok accounts are less mediated than girl-produced materials placed in archives by adults, they are still more likely to present something like ideal Christian girlhood as their creators are more likely to be or aspire to be Christian influencers. This is an idealized and sanitized evangelical girlhood presented by those living it, and presents valuable insight into aesthetics and practices seen as important. Accounts from youth ministers work more similarly to the handbooks and other adult-written materials

⁴¹⁹ On performance and practice, respectively, see Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴²⁰ See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

presented in previous chapters; these individuals are likely to try to show their followers what righteous girlhood should look like, but also joke about when youth group goes wrong. Perhaps most interesting for nostalgic purposes, though, are videos from women in their twenties calling themselves girls: in these cases, creators hold onto their own pasts, ascribing womanhood to those who are older and, in particular, those who are married.

Nostalgia and Gendered Evangelical Affect

Evangelicalism has recently undergone a public-relations shift, with many groups that formerly self-described as evangelical now moving toward broader terms such as “Christian” and “ecumenical” in an effort to distance themselves from a particular flavor of angry, Trump-voting self-described evangelical who may or may not go to church.⁴²² White American evangelicalism can currently be conceived as having two strands: one doubling down on a return to the white-patriarchal past, and the other purporting to reckon with that doubling down.

This dynamic has recently been explored by Lisa Weaver Swartz in her analysis of two evangelical seminaries: one that is committed to complementary gender roles including men as leaders and women as helpmeets, and another that, in trying to forge a more equitable path, reinforces patriarchal gender roles in more subtle ways.⁴²³ Though the apparent divide looks starker than even a couple of decades ago, Weaver Swartz’s work shows that at bottom, the two groups are more similar in outcomes than they perhaps wish to appear.⁴²⁴ Weaver Swartz argues that the more explicitly patriarchal group is also explicitly nostalgic, while the equality-professing one is more forward-looking; but as I have shown, nostalgia as an affective practice is

⁴²² For an insider view of this phenomenon, see Keller, “Can Evangelicalism Survive Donald Trump and Roy Moore?” For why I continue to use the term, see the introduction to this work.

⁴²³ Weaver Swartz, *Stained Glass Ceilings*.

⁴²⁴ For the recent history of evangelical gender roles, see Bartkowski, *Remaking the Godly Marriage*; Gallagher, *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*.

not simply about marinating in the past. Particularly when thinking about how children exist across white American evangelicalism, nostalgia is always present, just in different ways. The apparent divide between angry-patriarchal evangelicalism and nice-equitable evangelicalism is not so much in kind of nostalgia as it is in explicitness about the nostalgic project itself. In either case, girlhood remains an object of nostalgia for childhood innocence, and a vehicle for critical-nostalgic religious practice.

The materials examined here show an overwhelming bias toward the nice end of the spectrum, and they are primarily aimed at girls: this is not a coincidence. The one item that carries a clearly more confrontational affect is both written by a man and aimed at a gender-neutral teenage audience (which, as I have previously pointed out, is a category that tends to assume boys as the default). As Kristin Du Mez has argued, both aggression and the kind of restorative nostalgia that yearns for a full-on return of an idealized past are affective markers of contemporary evangelical masculinity. As early as the 1960s, she writes, “conservative evangelicals would be drawn to a nostalgic, rugged masculinity as they looked to reestablish white patriarchal authority in its many guises.”⁴²⁵ However, this only covers one portion of white evangelical gender practice. Pedagogical materials directed squarely at girls, as I have shown here, have long tended toward the more (superficially) equitable approach to gender performance. This evangelical girl power grants them agency to employ critical nostalgia to bring back certain aspects of an idealized past—known relational gender roles along an established binary, sexual purity, all-Christian communities—while retaining some empowering aspects of the present, such as the ability to have a career, to choose one’s own (cisgender, heterosexual) spouse, and to turn to legal protections against discrimination and sexual

⁴²⁵ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 37.

violence.⁴²⁶ A primary affect for girls in this strand of evangelicalism, and a nostalgic one, is niceness as a counterpoint to allegedly mainstream feminist anger.

Two purity guides published in the last decade present two different approaches to evangelical nostalgia that track with the gendered affective divide: on the angrier end is Sean McDowell's *Chasing Love*, from 2020, and on the gentler one, Amy-Jo Girardier's *Authentic Love*, from 2016.⁴²⁷ Both are published by Lifeway; *Chasing Love* is intended for a coed audience, while *Authentic Love* is more specifically intended for girls. Both are multi-week Bible studies for use by church youth groups, and like other purity guides they contain a mix of lessons, discussion questions, and homework activities, with a guide for leaders in the back and a purity pledge at the end. Despite their strong affective differences, they both also instruct readers in the same critical-nostalgic approach to gender practice, looking to the past to critique the present and redeem the future, and to do so within a context disparaging the mores of the present.

In *Chasing Love*, young readers are urged not only to rebel against "society today" but to see the evils in "tolerance, equality, diversity, and inclusion."⁴²⁸ The work characterizes America as having lost its way, straying off some previously beneficent path sometime in the past. Among other evidence that the present is worse than the past and needs fixing by means of critical-nostalgic practices, McDowell notes that "more people today regularly watch porn than ever before in history."⁴²⁹ He tells readers to embrace the "old-fashioned" sexual ethic presented in the guide by doing things like speaking against "homosexual behavior and transgenderism" out of what is characterized as love.⁴³⁰ This is presented as one way to "embrace the historic

⁴²⁶ For how this dynamic is practiced by adult evangelical women, see Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*; Griffith, *God's Daughters*.

⁴²⁷ McDowell, *Chasing Love*; Girardier, *Authentic Love*.

⁴²⁸ McDowell, *Chasing Love*, 16.

⁴²⁹ McDowell, 93. The author makes no mention of the fact that porn is easier to come by in the 21st century.

⁴³⁰ McDowell, 28.

Christian view of sex and marriage,” pointing again to the past as an authority on best Christian practices.⁴³¹

In contrast, while *Authentic Love* still relies on a particular reading of gender based on idealized past roles, it is not as confrontational in discussing it. The focus of *Authentic Love* is not countercultural rebellion but restoration of the soul and of the world.⁴³² Although the book is vague about what restoration means, the term itself points directly to the past and is even part of Boym’s foundational twofold definition of nostalgia, as restorative nostalgia identifies a desire to recreate what has been lost.⁴³³ This is distinct from the critical nostalgia that is this work’s primary analytic, as it involves not bringing certain aspects of the past into the present but instead the wholesale recreation of that past. Despite purporting to guide girls into the future, Girardier and the theology she espouses envision that future as being a restoration of the past, perhaps to the purity and innocence of Eden (and of girlhood). Rather than the restoration of a location in the Boymian sense, however, the restoration here is of the individual, to a past that said individual never personally experienced. If the object of nostalgia has been vague but identifiable in my other examples, here it is a truly unspecified deep past. This is evidence for the idea that evangelical nostalgia, despite frequently having specific objects like the era of American westward expansion or the allegedly less sex-saturated time of one’s grandparents, is ultimately for “the past” as an idea in itself. If anything, the object of nostalgia is Eden, before the fall of humanity.

Though what, exactly, the individual is being restored to is left up to interpretation, *Authentic Love* is generally more specific than its counterpart about the pasts to be yearned for,

⁴³¹ McDowell, 81.

⁴³² Girardier, *Authentic Love*, 30–31.

⁴³³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

pointing to “when your grandparents or great-grandparents were living”—which would have included the midcentury period with which this dissertation began—and explaining that Biblical womanhood is something to be passed down generationally.⁴³⁴ This womanhood, characterized largely by the characteristics laid out in Titus 2 and Proverbs 31, represents critical nostalgia enacted: creating future biblical women by training girls in traits rooted in the past and presented as antithetical to today’s culture and, in particular, to feminism (which is here characterized as a sneaky misdirection of energies that leaves men out).⁴³⁵ Though Girardier does acknowledge that the biblical past was actually not that great for women, her work on the whole teaches women’s roles as having been more appropriately defined in the past, a desirable contrast to the unfocused “what a girl wants” approach to femininity that Girardier claims is mainstream in the present day.⁴³⁶

The two affective approaches to nostalgia in *Chasing Love* and *Authentic Love* are both important, particularly as they speak to the current divide between, to put it crassly, evangelicals who voted for Trump and those who didn’t. They also speak to a potential gender divide in how nostalgia works for evangelicals (or, at least, is supposed to work). The angrier book is marketed to both—and it insists on that binary—genders. Its author is a man who by all appearances wrote alone, and though girls are occasionally addressed specifically, as when McDowell notes that girls tend to get more messaging about modesty, the audience is largely addressed as a whole.⁴³⁷ In not distinguishing between boy and girl readers, however, McDowell leaves their specificity unaddressed and the work risks treating girls as merely a variation on the default—boys—rather

⁴³⁴ Girardier, *Authentic Love*, 40; Girardier, 84.

⁴³⁵ Girardier, *Authentic Love*, 85.

⁴³⁶ Girardier, 62; Girardier, 86.

⁴³⁷ McDowell, *Chasing Love*, 38.

than their own category, a phenomenon noted by numerous scholars of girlhood studies.⁴³⁸ The work may aim to teach its entire young audience to be nostalgic, but the affective mode of that nostalgia, anger, is a masculine one not often available to good Christian girls. *Authentic Love*, on the other hand, treats its nostalgia gently, romanticizing the past rather than being angry that things are different in the present. Though the objects of nostalgia are largely the same, the book's specificity to girls allows it to emphasize a girl-specific affective expectation for how to perform that nostalgia: striving toward biblical womanhood, for which there is no girlhood counterpart. Girlhood is thus always situated in the past, even for those living it in the present.

In the same vein, the meaning of gender itself, in these books specifically and in evangelical pedagogical media more broadly, is also situated in the past. In *Chasing Love*, this includes (and this seems new for the current moment) the implication that openly transgender people and the push for trans rights are new. While guides for youth had previously discussed God's having created humans male and female in service of the importance of gender difference, here it is also used to convey the idea that there are *only* two distinct genders, emphasizing that they are immutable.⁴³⁹ That emphasis represents a new step in the development of evangelical gender ideology that I have traced throughout this work: from a major distinction between adult versus child gendered subjects, to a downplaying of age as a category of identity and new emphasis on difference between genders, to now a strong emphasis on the *between* itself, the binary on which the idea of gender difference lies.

For all this, though, *Chasing Love* is careful not to specify *exactly* what it means to be a boy or a girl—as is *Authentic Love*—and warns against sticking too closely to stereotypes.

⁴³⁸ E.g., Driscoll, *Girls*; Phillips, *The Faith of Girls*.

⁴³⁹ E.g., Payne, *Courting, Dating (Girls)*; King and King, *True Love Project*; Gibbs and Wakefield, *Complete (Girls)*.

(Although one reason given for not stereotyping is that “[w]hen we divide gender boxes too rigidly, we make it easy for people who do not fit the stereotypes to consider joining the other gender.”)⁴⁴⁰ On one hand, this book and others seem to say, gender performance is something that is up to each individual. On the other, there is something innate about gender that goes beyond (but is, unlike the queer reading of this same idea, inextricably and divinely connected to) sex organs and hormones. Like its predecessor purity guides, *Chasing Love* positions girls as romantics who need to protect themselves from boys, and boys as sexual aggressors who must protect girls from the boys themselves. These are presented as the major differences God instilled, and the differences at risk in a modern age ready to explore new understandings of gender. Nostalgic evangelical counterculture’s answer to feminism and LGBTQ rights is something called biblical womanhood.

The Proverbs 31 Woman

Girl-directed materials within white American evangelicalism are often shaped by the contemporary idea of biblical womanhood and specifically the Proverbs 31 woman, who, while not a girl as such, is a figure presented to girls as aspirational, as in *Authentic Love*. The passage, which closes out the Old Testament book of Proverbs, describes a “wife of noble character” as “worth far more than rubies” (NIV).⁴⁴¹ This figure is an industrious housewife, but also a shrewd businesswoman and provider. She wakes up early to cook for her family and makes linens both for her household and for sale. She is physically strong, wise, beloved by her husband and children, and “fears the Lord.” She is, in short, the ancient answer to the contemporary fiction of the girlboss who has it all, and she is the foundation of the contemporary evangelical biblical

⁴⁴⁰ McDowell, *Chasing Love*.

⁴⁴¹ Most of my sources cite this translation. For the history of why that is, see Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated*.

womanhood movement. Though the Proverbs 31 woman is an adult woman and wife, she is employed in materials addressed to girls much younger. She is shown as a countercultural aspirational figure full of virtues from the past, who is contrasted against contemporary secular womanhood. As Elizabeth Shively notes in her study of the Christian courtship movement, “A girl can use her single years to cultivate productivity, frugality, and domestic skills that will make her a wife worthy of this mythical woman’s reputation.”⁴⁴²

Numerous Christian commentators have disputed the hold this passage has taken on evangelical girls and women, yet for the most part the Proverbs 31 woman has been upheld as a role model with varying degrees of seriousness.⁴⁴³ There are Proverbs 31 ministries, articles on how to be such a woman in the modern day, and jokes about it on TikTok.⁴⁴⁴ Girardier asks her readers in the final session of the *Authentic Love* Bible study to discuss with their small groups, “How does our culture view women? What is our world telling us a woman’s role is?” She then urges them to “read Proverbs 31:10-31 and list what it says a biblical woman’s character looks like.”⁴⁴⁵ These are the lessons girls should take away from the study as a whole and use to build their future lives and selves. And this is far from the only place the figure appears in materials published for evangelical girls: Lifeway publishes a Bible study for girls all about Proverbs 31, and in a study of Focus on the Family’s *Brio* magazine for girls, Rachel Fischer found numerous references to Proverbs 31.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴² Shively, *Patriarchal Lineages in 21st-Century Christian Courtship*.

⁴⁴³ For critics of the Proverbs 31 woman, see Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*; Lauren Oquist, “Stop Obsessing About the Proverbs 31 Woman,” RELEVANT, August 28, 2014, <https://relevantmagazine.com/life5/stop-obsessing-about-proverbs-31-woman/>.

⁴⁴⁴ E.g., “Proverbs 31 Ministries,” accessed January 24, 2024, <https://proverbs31.org/>; Melissa Ringstaff, “A Simple Guide to Proverbs 31 | Explained for Modern Women,” A Virtuous Woman: A Proverbs 31 Ministry, June 18, 2020, <https://avirtuouswoman.org/proverbs-31-woman-explained-for-modern-women/>.

⁴⁴⁵ Girardier, *Authentic Love*, 105.

⁴⁴⁶ Emily Cole, *Her: Becoming a Proverbs 31 Girl* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2011); Rachel N. Fischer, “The Proverbs 31 Woman: Brio Magazine and Cultural Scripts for Evangelical Teenage Girls” (M.A., United States --

The Old Testament nostalgia present in veneration of the Proverbs 31 woman is just one more manifestation of a pattern found across the history covered in this project. Though the New Testament assuredly appears throughout as well—it would not be Christianity if it didn’t—the latter shows up more often as a source of direct instruction than a set of stories to emulate. This emphasis on the Old Testament could be for a number of reasons. For one, the Old Testament is longer and contains more narrative stories; there is simply more material in the Old Testament for which to be nostalgic. The Old Testament also, by definition, occurs before the birth and, more importantly, death and resurrection of Jesus. A tendency to see oneself in the Old Testament could speak to the cyclical nature of Christian time: evangelicals tend to be eschatologically oriented, looking forward to the return of Christ.⁴⁴⁷ Thus, they may find more to like and relate to in the period before the first coming of Jesus, rather than the more instruction-oriented falling action of the works that came after. For evangelicals, the world is fallen in the way it was before the events of the Gospels, and the solution is the conversion of individuals and, consequentially, of society.⁴⁴⁸ Looked at this way, it is easier to understand phenomena like, for example, an influencer’s characterization of Joshua as a follower of Christ, as well as widespread attachment to the Proverbs 31 woman as a paragon of Christian femininity.⁴⁴⁹

Biblical womanhood is not only taught through the written word. Social media influencers are a major force in teaching evangelical girls in critical-nostalgic strategies for countercultural living. Ashley Hetherington, one such influencer with a large audience of tween

Georgia, University of West Georgia, 2019), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2356058657/abstract/709DC2BF9A5E4EEFPQ/1>.

⁴⁴⁷ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sutton, *American Apocalypse*; Watt, “The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, 1925-1975.”

⁴⁴⁸ A strategy laid out by the evangelicals in Kerby’s work. Kerby, *Saving History*.

⁴⁴⁹ See *Q&A: How Can the Christian Girl Survive MIDDLE SCHOOL & HIGH SCHOOL?*, YouTube (coffeeandbibletime, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OSszbLHmdU>.

and teen girls, describes herself as “your online big sister in Christ.”⁴⁵⁰ A white woman in her early twenties, she started a blog during her first year of college and has since expanded to YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and even traditional publishing. Her videos make the implicit argument that appropriate evangelical girlhood is, like evangelical Christianity at large, relational and in particular relies on being surrounded by Christian peers in order to be properly religious. Included in those relationships, perhaps, is the viewer’s parasocial relationship with Hetherington herself. If a goal of American evangelicalism is to return to an early-church ideal based on personal relationships, then girlhood is a good place to start.

Most of Hetherington’s YouTube videos have thousands to tens of thousands of views, but one series on “how to become THAT Christian girl” regularly reaches the hundreds of thousands.⁴⁵¹ The introductory video makes note of the proliferation of “that girl,” morning-routine, and get-ready-with-me videos across YouTube and TikTok. This genre follows young, attractive, mostly white girls and women as they serenely portray the alleged routines of their daily lives. Often categorized as wellness content, these videos frequently portray their creators doing such activities as waking up early, working out, journaling, doing a skincare routine, and eating healthy food, all with nods to the products they are using and wearing and backed by a calming instrumental soundtrack.⁴⁵² Echoing evangelical critics of Proverbs 31 womanhood, critics of “that girl” videos have characterized them as bad influences on impressionable girls and young women, portraying a woman who has it all—and who doesn’t exist.

⁴⁵⁰ Ashley Hetherington, “Ashley Hetherington - YouTube,” accessed January 29, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/@ashleyheterington_/videos.

⁴⁵¹ Hetherington.

⁴⁵² Ruchira Sharma, “Who Is ‘That Girl’ & Why Is TikTok Obsessed With Her?,” *Refinery29*, July 10, 2021, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2021/07/10551994/tiktok-obsession-with-that-girl>; Shamani Joshi, “I Tried To Be TikTok’s ‘That Girl’ for a Week,” *Vice*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5db8ek/tiktok-youtube-viral-trend-that-girl-internet-genz-challenge>; Sahar Arshad, “What Does It Mean To Be ‘That Girl’?,” *Bustle*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.bustle.com/life/what-does-that-girl-mean-tiktok-viral-trend>.

In the 2022 introductory video to her “that Christian girl” collection, Hetherington establishes where her content falls in this universe, saying that “that girl” is “the girl who wakes up early, exercises daily, and drinks her green juice. But is that girl...biblical?”⁴⁵³ As it turns out, she pretty much is as long as she adds Bible study and prayer to her routine. Things “that Christian” girl does include standard genre tropes like getting up early, drinking lemon water, working out, eating a kale-and-sweet-potato bowl, and journaling. But each activity is here introduced by a Bible verse—several of them from Proverbs 31—and given a Christian character. So “that Christian girl” works out in order to glorify the God who created her body; what might be characterized elsewhere on TikTok as a hot-girl walk is here a “gratitude prayer walk”; and journaling happens in a purpose-made-and-marketed prayer journal with Bible verses on every page. Hetherington also adds activities like reading the Bible first thing in the morning and then praying in a dedicated “prayer closet” featuring a bulletin board covered in notes about whom or what one is praying for.⁴⁵⁴




Like a good deal of evangelical popular culture, Hetherington freely participates in fads popular on social media while syncretically making them Christian.⁴⁵⁵ While she does not utter the word “counterculture” in this video, the effect is the same, presenting a more righteous alternative or motivation to activities that are otherwise of-the-world. Sometimes Hetherington herself points out these contrasts, as when she notes that most “that girl” videos discuss manifesting where she discusses prayer, or that the secular videos use a product called the *Five-Minute Journal* while she uses a purpose-made prayer journal called *Beauty for Ashes*, which the

⁴⁵³ *How to Become “THAT Christian Girl” in 2023 || Biblical Tips to Become the Best Version of Yourself!* (ashleyheterington_, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd-bvC0yTiM>.

⁴⁵⁴ Prayer boards and closets are a recent phenomenon among evangelical girls and women in particular, and depending on the size of a home a prayer closet may also be a clothing closet that is simply also used as a retreat space.




⁴⁵⁵ Frykholm, *Rapture Culture [Electronic Resource]*; Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*; Luhr, *Witnessing Suburbia*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

viewer can buy by clicking a link in the video’s caption. Hetherington points out these differences several times throughout the video, interrupting an instrumental montage of herself making lemon water and then reading and writing in her Bible to say, “This part is not what you see in the normal ‘That Girl’ videos. You don’t see girls reading their Bibles. You just don’t. You don’t see them in their prayer closets. You just don’t!”⁴⁵⁶ Hetherington never actually explains what a prayer closet is; she just assumes that her audience is already familiar with the concept. This is one way to make explicit that That Christian Girl is not just not like other girls, but not like other “that girls”; she does these activities, even those that superficially resemble the same ones her counterparts do, not for worldly reasons but for transcendent ones.

Though Hetherington has said that her audience is mainly eighteen-to-thirty-five-year-olds, the YouTube comments tell a different story.⁴⁵⁷ Self-identified girls (with all of the age ambiguity that the term conveys) abound in the comments, and many from younger viewers list ages: fifteen, fourteen, eleven. They frequently talk about using videos like these to help them overcome their old selves. They also complain about circumstances at school that result in their being surrounded by non-Christian influences; one tween specifically requests “a video on how to be a good Christian girl in school when you are around different religions and cultures.” (A request Hetherington granted a few months later with “BACK TO SCHOOL TIPS FOR CHRISTIAN TEENAGERS   .”)⁴⁵⁸ Another commenter laments that most “that girl” videos refer to “new age practices” and applauds Hetherington’s for being “for the Lord,” again a

⁴⁵⁶ *How to Become “THAT Christian Girl” in 2023 || Biblical Tips to Become the Best Version of Yourself!*

⁴⁵⁷ “Q&A with Ashley Hetherington,” *Peer Magazine | The Salvation Army* (blog), July 1, 2022, <https://peermag.org/articles/qa-with-ashley-hetherington/>.

⁴⁵⁸ *BACK TO SCHOOL TIPS FOR CHRISTIAN TEENAGERS*    (ashleyheterington_, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bw9ychVgkNE>.

phenomenon contrasting the modern era with an ideal Christianity that is, by implication, distinct from modern culture but worth bringing back.

Expansive Girlhood

The idea of a teenager overcoming her old self looks on its surface to fly in the face of the girlhood nostalgia that is one part of evangelical femininity, but the individual self being overcome here must be considered separately from the identity category of girlhood. The girls posting these sorts of comments are echoing the core conversion narrative of American evangelicalism, not leaving behind girlhood itself. In fact, the girls I interviewed exhibited skepticism of girls trying to mature too quickly in a way that reflects the nostalgia for girlhood implicitly taught to them as a part of female evangelical identity. For example, as Iris, a twelve-year-old Asian girl at a “white-space” church in New York City, put it, “I wouldn't say they're mature, but they *act* more mature and they're like more like, they act older.”⁴⁵⁹ In effect, the girls critiqued those who were too deliberate about leaving girlhood in the past even as they understood it to be something that would end up in the past eventually.

Despite a noted shift in their age-group identification once they joined youth group (discussed later in this chapter), each of my interlocutors, echoing language pervasive among influencers, nevertheless identified as girls. However, while all of the girls I talked to identified *themselves* as firmly in girlhood, they believed girls *in general* made some kind of turn toward maturity as soon as they hit middle school. Even if they did not necessarily buy into the instant-womanhood idea for themselves, it still had influence, impacting how they saw the category of “girl.” They lamented this sudden turn toward apparent maturity, displaying a kind of nostalgia for childhood on behalf of the girls they saw leaving it behind. Rejecting the drive to “act” more

⁴⁵⁹ Iris, Interview with Iris, Zoom, April 22, 2023.

grown-up even while recognizing their growing maturity marked them as countercultural, not like other girls by virtue of holding onto being a girl.

My interlocutors' perception of other girls is one part of a pervasive slippage between the categories of girl and woman present in many spaces but notable in evangelical ones, with adult women tagging videos "#christiangirl" and, on the other hand, videos satirizing youth-group boys using terms like "woman of God" to get in the good graces of girls they would like to date.⁴⁶⁰ Girlhood studies scholar Catherine Driscoll has discussed this type of slippage in the context of referring to herself as a girl well into her thirties, particularly among those of her own age cohort: "This connection remains because girlhood seems something I have experienced... I'm still not sure when I stopped being a girl, if I did."⁴⁶¹ Indeed, the tendency to refer to female subjects broadly as girls or "girlies" is common across TikTok and not unique to the evangelical subset of creators (witness 2023's #girlsdinner phenomenon, or the "hot girl" memes before that).⁴⁶² But within the context and history of evangelical girlhood, in particular the shift toward girls suddenly becoming women, it packs more of a punch. When used by adult influencers to discuss any female subject younger than her mid-twenties or so, and often in the context of looking forward to marriage, this usage implies that someone occupies girlhood up until marriage, at which point she transitions to womanhood.

⁴⁶⁰ For the former, see *We're Christian Girls! Your Sisters in Christ!* #christian #fyp #christiangirl #christiangirls #christianitytiktok #christianity #humor #funny #comedy #skit #christianmemes, TikTok (hopeharvard, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/@hopeharvard/video/7305559659988159790?q=%23christiangirlcheck&t=1705605549457>; *We're Christian Girls!*, 2023; *We're Christian Girls* ❤️🙏 #christian #christiantiktok #Jesus #JesusisKing #love #Christiangirls, TikTok (juliaapoe, 2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/@juliaapoe/video/7309613930677013802?lang=en>. For the latter, see Huffman, "Caleb Huffman (@caleb.Huf)."

⁴⁶¹ Driscoll, *Girls*, 2.

⁴⁶² See Jessica Roy, "Is It a Meal? A Snack? No, It's 'Girl Dinner,'" *The New York Times*, July 8, 2023, sec. Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/08/style/girl-dinner.html>; Mia Mercado, "I Can't Shut Up About 'Hot-Girl Walks,'" *The Cut*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.thecut.com/2022/05/hot-girl-walks-tiktok.html>.

Videos by female evangelical TikTok influencers often talk about future husbands in some way. This may speak to the ages of most popular creators on evangelical TikTok—they are old enough for marriage to be a current concern rather than a hypothetical future one—but is also reflected in content by and about younger girls in middle and high school. Early-twenties influencers are old enough not to fall under common definitions of girlhood, but they are still close enough in age to “actual” girls that they may serve as (non-biblical) role models or representations of the types of women they can expect to become soon.

The “We’re Christian Girls” meme that opened this chapter shows a joking awareness of how “Christian girls” are perceived outside of the subculture and where those perceptions may actually be spot-on. “We’re Christian girls,” a creator says to the camera in one. “We’re so excited for Jesus to come back, but only after we get married and have kids.” (A joke I found in multiple videos.)⁴⁶³ Other things Christian girls are said to do include praying for their future husbands more than for themselves, wanting to “become Proverbs 31 women” but being unable to wake up early enough, and having Queen Esther and Ruth as primary role models.⁴⁶⁴ One video shouts out “ring by spring” college engagements and passive-aggressive prayers on others’ behalf.⁴⁶⁵ While these videos differ in the details, they all touch on the desire for a husband (and the need to be content with “Jesus alone” first), the compulsion to post Bible-study activities on social media, and characteristics that specifically position them as countercultural, such as praying instead of manifesting or owning “50 Bible verse t-shirts.” Comments on the videos range from statements of relatability to notes that the commenter encountered these types of girls and women in a Christian past they now seem to have left behind.

⁴⁶³ *We’re Christian Girls; We’re Christian Girls!*, 2023.

⁴⁶⁴ *We’re Christian Girls*.

⁴⁶⁵ *We’re Christian Girls!*, 2023.

Nice Christian Girls

Another trait that allegedly makes Christian girls distinctive, and one associated with nostalgic biblical womanhood but important enough to be set apart, is niceness. Several of my interlocutors noted niceness as something that distinguishes Christian from non-Christian girls. While they tended to use terms like kindness, forgiveness, and grace, I choose to use the term “niceness” to describe the outwardly legible affective practice that cultivates correct emotion. That affective practice can mean suppressing emotions that do not read as nice.

Amy, a white twelve-year-old from the DMV region, struggled to articulate what being a girl meant for her. While not asked whether being a girl is hard, that was exactly where she went. “For me,” she told me, “it’s hard not to compare myself, as a girl. To other people.”⁴⁶⁶ For her, this was linked to another struggle: to emote properly. She searched for a way to describe it, at first saying the struggle was “to not get angry,” and then clarifying that she meant she felt expected to contain her emotions, which was not quite right, either. Eventually she settled on an explanation that being a girl meant learning how to “express my emotions in a kind way” without hurting others. “It’s hard to hold my tongue sometimes,” she said. This journey demonstrates a disconnect between what adults said they expected of her (to be kind) and what she actually felt expected to do (contain her emotions). It also throws new light on Valerie Hey’s argument that girls tend to self-police, particularly with regard to disagreements between each other, as a response to peer surveillance.⁴⁶⁷ Though this does seem to be one aspect of what Amy articulated, her self-correcting statements that Christian girls should be kind reflect the language of pedagogical materials written by adults. The way she understood the meaning behind the

⁴⁶⁶ Amy, Interview with Amy, Zoom, May 9, 2023.

⁴⁶⁷ Hey, *The Company She Keeps*, 57.

instruction to be kind was what drove her emotional self-policing, conceived as an important gendered religious practice.

Amy was not unique in saying that one thing that made Christian girls distinctive was niceness or kindness, and indeed her comments on emotional regulation echo those of a young, female camp counselor back in 1962.⁴⁶⁸ Gloria, a white fifteen-year-old also from the DMV region, phrased it in terms of granting grace to people, which she said basically boiled down to, “even if you don't like someone, you can still be nice to them.”⁴⁶⁹ Lily, fourteen, linked being nice to Proverbs 31, which she said called her to have “a gentle heart” and “be nice to my non-existent husband.”⁴⁷⁰ Iris also noted that Christian girls should be nice, but that it was hard to only say nice things about people “when you're Christian and all your friends aren't.”⁴⁷¹ Iris also noted that part of being a Christian girl was trying to fit a narrow set of expectations that may not match what one feels on the inside, as evidenced by her struggles to be quite as nice when not surrounded by other Christians.

“Niceness is a value at the intersection of being white, middle class, and female,” writes Rebecca Hains in her analysis of girl power.⁴⁷² For evangelical girls in white spaces, this niceness is not only a normative expectation, but a religious one. In order to be a good evangelical girl, one must be kind, and in order to feel like a good evangelical girl, it would seem, one should suppress emotions that do not fit that rubric.

Amy's articulation of what it feels like to work to be kind unwittingly echoed Hochschild's observation that a big part of raising middle-class children (and, I argue, white,

⁴⁶⁸ “Letter from Kay to Barbara Priddy,” July 21, 1962.

⁴⁶⁹ Interview with Gloria.

⁴⁷⁰ Interview with Lily.

⁴⁷¹ Interview with Iris.

⁴⁷² Hains, *Growing up with Girl Power*, 176.

female, and evangelical ones) is teaching them “emotion management,” referring not to discipline in action (being kind), but discipline in affect (keeping non-kind emotions in check).⁴⁷³ Emotion work may or may not lead to correct action, but that is not the point; the emotions are themselves the practice, and their discipline can be “done by the self upon the self, by the self upon others, and by others upon oneself,” an especially important point when talking about minors.⁴⁷⁴ Girls are taught to do particular things by adults, who together with peers and the girls themselves work to create Christ-like kindness via emotion regulation.

This collaborative emotion work comes together in what Sara Ahmed has termed an affective economy, in which “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities.”⁴⁷⁵ Though her particular economic model is not something I am exploring in depth here, the idea of emotions as community-building actions, which builds on Hochschild’s work and is also a component of Iddo Tavory’s theory of summoning, is manifest in evangelical girl identity.⁴⁷⁶ Encouraging emotional suppression and calling it kindness, or hoping that the former will transform into the latter, is certainly not unique to the white evangelical context, but in that context, this kind of regulation and misrecognition is not just a norm but a gendered religious task. This version of kindness was how Amy and other girls distinguished themselves from non-Christian girls, using it to bond with each other and with the rest of their evangelical community.

Numerous scholars have noted the importance of niceness to both whiteness and femininity.⁴⁷⁷ The significance of niceness for white evangelical girlhood is therefore part of a

⁴⁷³ Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure,” 551.

⁴⁷⁴ Hochschild, 562.

⁴⁷⁵ Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

⁴⁷⁶ Iddo Tavory, *Summoned: Identification and Religious Life in a Jewish Neighborhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁴⁷⁷ For the relationship between niceness and American whiteness, see Carrie Tirado Bramen, *American Niceness: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Setha Low, “Maintaining Whiteness: The Fear

larger affective phenomenon. Particularly when appropriate Christian girlhood is set in contrast to allegedly confrontational feminism, however, niceness works as a normative trait that distinguishes evangelical girls as comporting with allegedly more appropriate gender roles of the past against which progressives are now pushing back. In this way, niceness is itself counterculturally nostalgic, a quality of both a sweet childhood and a past before women decided that patriarchy was oppression.

Relationality and the Gender Binary

In keeping with in-but-not-of-the-world syncretism, contemporary pedagogical materials, like their forebears, make sure to note that appropriate gender expression can happen in all kinds of ways so long as it does not violate nostalgic ideals of biblical womanhood (and manhood). McDowell, for instance, urges his readers to practice supposedly passé—and therefore countercultural and correct—gender roles. He insists that they are not strict—“some girls may enjoy watching football and some guys might really have an eye for interior design”—but that they are nevertheless innate and complementary.⁴⁷⁸ He also writes that knowing these traits is important to children’s development, and that “failing to recognize these differences significantly harms children.”⁴⁷⁹ It is noteworthy that McDowell nods to gender instruction beginning in childhood, which tracks with the observation that children only slowly realize they have a gender; most of my interlocutors claimed that they did not really see their girlhood as a distinct category of identity until late elementary or early middle school (which is about when gender-segregated small groups begin at church). The pedagogy of nostalgia, though, seizes upon the

of Others and Niceness,” *Transforming Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (October 2009): 79–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7466.2009.01047.x>. For niceness and femininity, see Patricia H. Davis, *Beyond Nice: The Spiritual Wisdom of Adolescent Girls* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Hains, *Growing up with Girl Power*.

⁴⁷⁸ McDowell, *Chasing Love*, 121.

⁴⁷⁹ McDowell, 91.

idea of innocent children displaying correct gendered behavior before being corrupted by modern, progressive, mainstream culture. What the pedagogy seems to want to instruct children in, then, is holding onto their already-known gender roles rather than learning masculinity or femininity from scratch. Despite all this, what these roles actually are outside of an intercourse context is never really explored beyond taken-for-granted nods to the hardwiring of men and women to be sexual or romantic, visual or emotional, as though the reader should already know what the roles are (perhaps through their innate knowledge as a gendered being themselves).

My interlocutors, who unlike most of the influencers and authors discussed thus far were both temporally and professedly girls, did not actually tend to think much about what their identification meant. When they thought about the idea of being a girl at all—not a guarantee, considering that each time I asked an interlocutor what being a girl meant to them, they asked for clarification—it was more often in contrast to boys rather than women, which speaks to the increased importance in white American evangelicalism of gender difference over age difference in terms of identity. “Well, I’m not a guy, for starters,” Lily told me when asked what it meant to be a girl, equating it with having a “female body” and the capacity to give birth.⁴⁸⁰ Amy believed there was not much difference between Christian girls and Christian boys “other than gender” (left unexamined).⁴⁸¹ Jackie, an Asian twelve-year-old from New York City at a “white-space” church, expressed the same sentiment.⁴⁸² More often, though, they echoed the pedagogical materials I have discussed here, pointing to boys’ comparative spontaneity and lack of

⁴⁸⁰ Interview with Lily.

⁴⁸¹ Interview with Amy.

⁴⁸² Interview with Jackie, Zoom, May 13, 2023.

maturity.⁴⁸³ Some girls took this comparison at face value, while others, like Iris, felt that girls were not necessarily more mature but felt the need to “*act more mature*” nonetheless.

Several interlocutors reported that being a girl is also harder than being a boy, again without that being the question asked. Sometimes the relative difficulty of being a girl was ascribed to patriarchal structures: “You’re just looked as you could do less than a man could do,” explained Gloria.⁴⁸⁴ Other times it was because they perceived boys to have relatively easy relationships with their peers, as with Iris, who claimed that for boys peer pressure might revolve around something like preferred games, while for girls it is more about “how you act and live compared to other people.”⁴⁸⁵ Though no one specifically mentioned the visual/emotional dichotomies so present in pedagogical sources, they did tend to characterize boys as having less self-control, at least when it came to things like goofing off during Sunday school. As Gloria noted, she was not aware of her own girlhood as such until relatively recently, perceiving all children as basically the same when she was younger but progressively learning about the differences in “how the two genders live.”⁴⁸⁶

Like girls outside of church contexts, the girls with whom I spoke tended to socialize only or primarily with other girls. Gloria did not seem to notice the significance of her phrasing when she noted that there are also boys at youth group, “but we normally just sit with our friends.”⁴⁸⁷ Ruth, a white thirteen-year-old from the Pacific Northwest, also took “friends” to mean “girls.”⁴⁸⁸ This characterization of friends in contrast to boys, said as though it were obvious, reflects Hey’s observation of girls using superficially quieter girl-girl friendships as a

⁴⁸³ Char, Interview with Char, Facetime, June 22, 2023; Interview with Lily; Ruth, Interview with Ruth, Facetime, June 22, 2023.

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with Gloria.

⁴⁸⁵ Interview with Iris.

⁴⁸⁶ Interview with Gloria.

⁴⁸⁷ Interview with Gloria.

⁴⁸⁸ Interview with Ruth.

way to “[define] themselves against the noisier and messier form of boys' overt behaviors.”⁴⁸⁹

The homosocial environments of small groups, in particular, are one way girls are able to shed the awkwardness of personal disclosure, surely something that would please the authors of the various pedagogical materials over the decades that endorse this very approach. Gender-based small groups are, in fact, part of a larger network of relationality where evangelical girls work out their identities and employ all-Christian environments to feel more Christian themselves. The key such environment is youth group.

Church youth groups most often range in age from sixth to twelfth grades, divided if possible into middle and high school groups. This is not a hard-and-fast rule: Iris was moved to youth group a year early after the pandemic kept people away from her usually-large New York City church and left her fifth-grade Sunday school class with three people.⁴⁹⁰ Smaller churches may have a single youth group do all activities together, while a larger one may subdivide middle and high school groups into grade-and-gender-based small groups for Sunday school and Bible study instruction. Often, youth will leave the church service before the sermon for Sunday school or a separate youth-oriented church service, followed by games and activities and/or small-group Bible study. They will also often meet midweek for similar activities.

The move to youth group can feel like a huge transition. Char, a white thirteen-year-old from the Pacific Northwest, described children's Sunday school as oriented around discrete biblical lessons, while youth group focused on connecting those lessons to personal issues; Lily articulated the same thing.⁴⁹¹ “It was a little lonely,” Iris told me of the transition to youth group, echoing other girls I interviewed. “But then I got used to it.” After a long pause, she added,

⁴⁸⁹ Hey, *The Company She Keeps*.

⁴⁹⁰ Interview with Iris.

⁴⁹¹ Interview with Char; Interview with Lily.

“And, like, made friends.”⁴⁹² Gloria described it as “overwhelming” despite the fact that, unlike Iris, she had transitioned with a larger group and already knew many people there. She attributed this feeling to the sheer size of the youth group compared to a Sunday school class, and also noted that youth group initially felt “awkward” since activities involved getting more “personal” and “in depth” than those in children’s Sunday school.⁴⁹³ All of my interlocutors had been in youth group for at least a year by the time I spoke with them, and while all had initially found the differences between Sunday school and youth group awkward, all had grown to appreciate the latter. Amy went so far as to say that, unlike children’s Sunday school, youth group felt like a “community,” due to the combination of greater personal autonomy and more obligations to others she felt she had been granted upon moving into middle school.⁴⁹⁴

Youth group is one of the several places that, like their predecessors, evangelical girls are encouraged by authority figures to seek a nostalgic all-Christian community. One example comes from Coffee and Bible Time, a YouTube channel started in 2015 by two sisters and their mother, which has as of this writing 364,000 subscribers.⁴⁹⁵ Ashley Armijo (née Krause) and Taylor Krause were in high school when they and their “mentor mama” started the channel, and they maintained and expanded the effort as they both graduated, attended Moody Bible Institute, and, in Armijo’s case, got married. Their company now includes YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok accounts, as well as a podcast and a website that sells Bible study curricula, a paid weekly devotional newsletter, and prayer journals.⁴⁹⁶ Though it is likely their audience has aged

⁴⁹² Interview with Iris.

⁴⁹³ Interview with Gloria.

⁴⁹⁴ Interview with Amy.

⁴⁹⁵ Coffee and Bible Time, “Coffee and Bible Time - YouTube,” accessed January 23, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/@coffeeandbibletime/featured>.

⁴⁹⁶ “Coffee & Bible Time | Prayer Journals + Christian Products & Community,” Coffee & Bible Time, accessed January 23, 2024, <https://www.coffeeandbibletime.com>.

with them, they have also continued to speak directly to girls the age they were (Krause, the younger, was fourteen) when they got started.

It is clear that this account is watched by girls as young as middle school based on questions and comments posted to the sisters' videos. One recent video is directly addressed to middle-schoolers and aims to answer a viewer question: "How can the Christian girl survive middle school?"⁴⁹⁷ Throughout the video, the sisters add high school to their advice with vocal emphasis ("middle school *and high school*"), but it is clear the question comes from a middle-schooler and the response is primarily for that demographic. Talking about their own experiences in middle school, the sisters at first seem to eschew nostalgia for a period in life they both claim to have mostly, deliberately, forgotten because of its difficulties. But at the same time, both claim to remember the good things and in particular note middle school as the time when they began to truly be enthusiastic about their Christianity. This characterization ultimately means teaching current middle-school girls that while the life period they are in is rough right now, it will become something for which they will be nostalgic when they are older—as long as they choose the right path and get involved with a church youth group.

"What I needed!" one comment on the video says. "I'm in middle school and it's tough to try and stay with Christ when all your [*sic*] surrounded in is non-Christian people. Keep up the good work!" This comment and other, similar ones refer to a portion of the video where the sisters encourage church activities as a way to surround oneself with Christians and make it easier not to fall into sin—the exact strategy employed by summer camps more than seventy years prior. In fact, several comments (purportedly) come from girls lamenting the lack of Christians at their public middle schools, or the lack of Christian practice they see among peers

⁴⁹⁷ Q&A.

in school clubs like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. These girls are voicing their acceptance of the idea that to be a good Christian, one must surround herself with Christians and that anything else is worthy of lament. The commenters, at least, accept and reflect the message that they should yearn for an all-Christian group—and, perhaps, society—while taking it further by criticizing those within such groups who do not practice the religion in what they perceive to be the right way.

Ashley Hetherington also emphasizes relationality in her videos, both between the self and God (characterizing her religion, in the evangelical manner, as first and foremost a personal relationship) and between the self and other people. Her final tip for being That Christian Girl is for her viewers to surround themselves with people who “help you be the woman God created you to be.”⁴⁹⁸ Here again is the slippage between girl and woman, and here also is the emphasis on an all-Christian social milieu as part of being a good Christian girl. Hetherington does not specifically say to surround yourself with practicing Christians, but between the woman-of-God language and her suggestion on where to find good friends—“small groups, Bible study, church”—the intent is clear.

These recommendations, and the results reported by my interlocutors, bear some resemblance to what Iddo Tavory has termed “summoning,” or the social circumstances that converge to create a particular identity.⁴⁹⁹ Being surrounded by evangelical Christians summons an individual’s evangelical identification, with all the “moral and emotional expectations” that entails.⁵⁰⁰ That identification is ultimately rooted in feeling evangelical, and learning how to develop those feelings. Girlhood, and its attendant preparation for womanhood, is also in large

⁴⁹⁸ *How to Become “THAT Christian Girl” in 2023 || Biblical Tips to Become the Best Version of Yourself!*

⁴⁹⁹ Tavory, *Summoned*.

⁵⁰⁰ Tavory, 11.

part relational as girls work with their identities as daughters, friends, and potential girlfriends and future wives. Valerie Hey has argued that the process of identity development in girlhood is wrapped up in relationality, writing, “It is between and amongst girls that identities are variously practised, appropriated, resisted and negotiated.”⁵⁰¹ If relationships summon girls’ identities as both girls and Christians, then there is surely no *other* way to become a good Christian girl.

Asked the difference between Christian and non-Christian girls, my interlocutors tended to say that Christian girls were more forgiving and had more mental and emotional depth, although Jackie thought that people were generally the same.⁵⁰² One girl said the two groups’ senses of “right and wrong” were different.⁵⁰³ Several of them told me that Christian girls use fewer curse words.⁵⁰⁴ Amy proposed that the differences between Christian and non-Christian girls grow more distinct as girls grow older, “because so many more people do things that aren’t good.”⁵⁰⁵ Therefore, the Christian girls who continue to try to be good, with a large amount of help from their Christian environments, are more noticeable by virtue of their maintaining the good behavior of their childhoods.

Many of my interlocutors didn’t go to school with most or any of their church friends, even if most of those friends went to school with each other (this was not intentional on my part and in fact came as a surprise). As a result, they tended to describe church and school friends as being two different types of friends, with school friends being more likely to be people with whom they joked around and church friends being those with whom they were more likely to share their deeper thoughts and feelings. Even Char, who attended a private Christian school, felt

⁵⁰¹ Hey, *The Company She Keeps*, 30.

⁵⁰² Interview with Jackie.

⁵⁰³ Interview with Lily.

⁵⁰⁴ Interview with Amy; Interview with Iris; Interview with Lily.

⁵⁰⁵ Interview with Amy.

this way, who that her school friends and church friends had “different personalities from each other,” although she also acknowledged that the different environments were governed by different rules.⁵⁰⁶ School friends were also perceived as more worldly, in the evangelical “of the world” sense of the term: Iris told me that her school friends were prone to cursing, focusing on dating and “sexuality,” and on the whole had “less boundaries” than she did as a Christian.⁵⁰⁷ School friends tended to be entirely or largely non-Christian, and the girls seldom invited them to church, or seldom succeeded when they made an attempt.⁵⁰⁸ Many of them just accepted this as the way things are, although fourteen-year-old Lily treated school as an opportunity to be a “mini-missionary.”⁵⁰⁹

While this was how things worked for the girls I happened to interview, several of them pointed out that their church friends often went to school with each other, creating much more overlap between church and school friends for themselves and, intentionally or not, leading to feelings of being left out on the part of those whose church and school lives were more distinct.⁵¹⁰ Nevertheless, my interlocutors appreciated having an all-Christian social environment available to them at church. No one explicitly said that hanging out with other Christian girls made them act more Christian, but many felt more comfortable performing Christianity in evangelical social contexts; perhaps, to nod to summoning once again, such contexts were not only more comfortable but made my interlocutors feel more Christian. Though they did not directly echo influencers’ advice to boost their faith by surrounding themselves with Christians, it does seem to have worked out that way.

⁵⁰⁶ Interview with Char.

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with Iris; see also interview with Gloria.

⁵⁰⁸ Interview with Iris; Interview with Gloria; Interview with Amy; Interview with Char.

⁵⁰⁹ Interview with Lily.

⁵¹⁰ Interview with Iris; Interview with Amy.

It went without saying for my interlocutors that Christian friendship was between girls. On the other hand, boys at youth group were often received as a foil (see above). On a larger scale, boys occupy a dual role in normatively heterosexual girlhood, acting as both source of annoyance and romantic goal. One TikTok echoes my interlocutors' bent toward the more annoyed view of boys; the creator does not like that the figure of the boy shows up even in girl-exclusive spaces. The video uses an Elmo voiceover clip popular on TikTok as a jumping-off point, with the creator's complaint in closed captioning:

See, the problem is, I want to talk about Jesus in youth group
But I can't
Because they wanna talk about boys⁵¹¹

This sentiment positions the video's creator, and the creators of videos like it, in opposition to those looking to date. In effect, this genre frames the youth-group dating scene as worldly and too focused on the future. The use of Elmo as a background voice is interesting: the audio clip, which features the Muppet complaining that he would like to leave a situation but is stuck for "another forty minutes," is a meme TikTok creators use for a variety of videos about situations they do not want to be in. However, the use of a nostalgic children's character is particularly salient when the complaint is about girls who are trying to grow up too fast.

In TikToks from and for girls who fit the traditional definition of the word—that is, those not yet in college—the idea of youth group as a place to date is also a common theme from the opposite point of view. The videos that talk positively about dating within youth group exhibit both aspirational gender roles and the future thinking discussed in the last chapter. The girls looking forward in time, at least on TikTok, emulate older "girl" creators through the lens

⁵¹¹ *Dont Get Me Wrong i Talk about Boys a Good but Too Im Not Gonna Lie, but When We're in a Place Specifically Made to Worship God, Jesus Should Be the Only Man We Talkin Bout - Im Saying This out of Love Ladies* 🍷 #youthgroup #christiantiktok #church #youthgroupthings #youthgroupbelike, TikTok (nikole_591, 2023), https://www.tiktok.com/@nikole_591/video/7203473140196937003?lang=en.

of their own experience. TikToks from evangelical tween and teen girls frequently center on youth group and Bible study activities and reflect many of the same dating concerns the older women joke about. Beyond just what to look for in a date, this genre of video both satirizes and participates in the future-oriented temporality discussed in the last chapter by characterizing cute teens of the opposite sex at youth group as potential future wives or husbands.

A pair of videos purporting to show green and red flags for “church boys”—that is, points for and against them as potential romantic partners—both satirizes stereotypes and encourages the idea of dating within youth group. Green flags include “stacking chairs” (a common theme in videos about the desirability of youth-group boys, and a commentary on the frequent necessity of getting out folding chairs in a rec room for church activities), clearing plates and carrying bags for their female counterparts, and highlighting verses in their Bibles.⁵¹² Red flags, much goofier, include “does shots with communion wine,” not giving up seats or opening doors for girls (but doing so for other boys), and showing “absolutely no emotion during worship.”⁵¹³ Though I was able to find red/green-flag videos about girls as well, they do not seem nearly so prevalent as those about boys and just as often come from other girls discussing friendship as from boys discussing romantic relationships.⁵¹⁴ While the subjects of these videos, then, are largely boys, the disparity gives valuable insight into what girls are thinking and talking about. Videos about what to look for in a godly date rarely discuss perceptions of girls themselves, but they do either come from girls or purport to give them advice, largely with an eye to the future.

⁵¹² *Youth Group Boys > Everyone Else #youthgroup #churchboy #greenflags #bible #christianhumor #jesus #christiantiktok #fyp #euphoria* (TikTok: toktokforjesus, 2022), <https://www.tiktok.com/@toktokforjesus/video/7071781554434903301>.

⁵¹³ *Not Based on Real Events #churhtok #youthgroupthings #biblehumor #redflags #youthgroupumor #churchboy #fyp*, TikTok (toktokforjesus, 2022), <https://www.tiktok.com/@toktokforjesus/video/7083702029893389574?lang=en>.

⁵¹⁴ The theme of assumed heterosexuality continues here, although in the current day youth group participants seem much more accepting of queer people as individuals who exist. Interview with Iris.

Another TikTok, by sixteen-year-old Christian influencer Madison Grace Lee, shows her in a modest outfit (long sleeves, high neck, skirt above the knee but legs covered in tights) strutting and lip-syncing to a popular audio clip that remixes Beyoncé chanting, “I am on to see my husband.”⁵¹⁵ The video is captioned, “me on the way to youth group.” The video has over 11,000 views, and its commenters mostly write about how relatable it is and tag their friends. It is clear here that the future-thinking attitude encouraged for evangelical girls did not wane with the purity movement—and also that current girls are aware of the perceived ridiculousness of an attitude they nevertheless take on. Videos along these lines are created by boys as well. One features the sequence:

walks into youth group
sees “future” wife
making sure I am fresher than a grilled chick-fil-a sandwich

It ends with the boy flashing a strained smile and crossed eyes.⁵¹⁶ However, the majority of these types of videos seem to feature girls, and even the comments on the boy-created video laid out here are mostly from girl-coded accounts, some of them talking about the video’s relatability and others calling the creator cute and even proposing marriage themselves.

Some of this, particularly the marriage proposals, stems from the facetiousness inherent to both internet culture and teenhood. But seen in light of the preceding history of evangelical girlhood, whose most recent turn involved conceptualizing girls as young as early adolescence as future women first and foremost, the jokes about finding a spouse at youth group appear more profound. The TikTok Christian girls are not only satirizing but also promoting this idea; witness

⁵¹⁵ *Just Kidding...kinda* 😊👉 #youthgroup #cowgirlboots #jesuslovesyou #madisongrace, TikTok (madisongracelee_, 2023), https://www.tiktok.com/@madisongracelee_/video/7225319661259296042.

⁵¹⁶ *It Be like That...* #christian #jesus #jesuslovesyou #christianboy #christianboycheck #bible #youthgroup, TikTok (lukewrightmain, 2020), <https://www.tiktok.com/@lukewrightmain/video/6792036401656450309>.

the title of the “husband” video, “just kidding...kinda 😊💍.”⁵¹⁷ Though this may not necessarily be the case, or may not be long-lasting, these examples show that evangelical girls themselves, at least by the early 2020s, are active participants in the future nostalgia that has been taught to them in their religious environments. That they are able to laugh at their participation merely speaks to the idea that evangelicalism is a counterculture that the mainstream of TikTok may make fun of. At the same time, these videos are clearly not made for that mainstream but for the in-group who relate to the not-*not*-kidding tone of the “husband” video and others in its genre. While someone from outside the subculture may perceive evangelical youths talking about meeting their spouses at youth group as old-fashioned and a little cheesy, those who participate in evangelical youth groups are more apt to recognize both the nostalgically aspirational bent and the over-the-top satire present in the videos.

Despite the messages they receive, contemporary evangelical girls do not seem to think of *themselves* in a context of present or future womanhood; most of the time they live in the present of girlhood, though a different girlhood than the one they lived earlier in their lives. Many of my interlocutors noted that as the non-Christian girls in their lives began to take on practices like cursing or “vaping in the bathroom,” they themselves refrained from changing their behaviors and perceived themselves not to be acting more mature than their years.⁵¹⁸ In a way, despite the meaning of girlhood changing in pedagogical materials, my interlocutors’ understandings of girlhood track more closely with earlier understandings of girl and woman as distinct. The girlhood of middle and high school is more mature, more aware of her religion, and more gendered than her predecessor, but she is still not thinking much about herself as a woman.

⁵¹⁷ *Just Kidding...Kinda.*

⁵¹⁸ Interview with Lily. See also Interview with Gloria; Interview with Iris.

The gendering itself, despite being characterized as natural, is taught to them, and their awareness of their gender and how it should be done tracks with the age-based pedagogical approaches traced here.

It is an interesting paradox: gender roles as innate and divinely ordained, but also as something that must be taught lest children stray down the wrong path. The long history of evangelical gender role instruction no doubt indicates an understanding, on some level, that gender performance is, indeed, a practice that must be taught.⁵¹⁹ But for those within the tradition, the paradox is not there: individuals are immutably gendered, but what they are taught is how to perform it in a specifically evangelical, nostalgic way, passing on biblical womanhood to the next generation, who will no doubt transform it again.

⁵¹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

Conclusion: The Past and Future of Evangelical Girlhood

When I was in high school in the mid-2000s, during what at the time felt like the peak of the evangelical purity movement, a friend invited me to participate in a book study her small group was doing. The group consisted of girls from her church, which was big enough to have small groups divided not just by gender but also by grade, plus a couple of moms who led the study. The book we would be discussing over the next several weeks was *Dateable: Are You? Are They?*, a minor entry into the pantheon of evangelical purity guides for teenagers that might be more accurately described as gender-instruction manuals.⁵²⁰ The cover photo featured, on the right, the left half of a teen girl dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt, cut off at the waist so her upper torso and face were not visible. From the top center of the cover descended her hand, nails playfully painted a bright and sparkly aqua, clutching the much bigger pinky and ring fingers of a masculine hand descending from the top-left corner of the cover.

Large and veined, the masculine hand gave the impression that it did not belong to another teenager. Teenage me assumed it belonged to an older man, not a boyfriend but, given the childlike clutch of the girl's hand on the man's two fingers, perhaps a father, Jesus, or a visual representation of God. Although the book contained sections for and about both boys and girls, the cover's focus was squarely on the girl and, in particular, her status as not (yet) a grown woman. The cover of this book placed girlhood—importantly, not just non-age-specific femininity—at the center of appropriate Christian dating practice, conveying that the person who was “dateable” was a girl acting not romantically but instead in a childlike relationship with some masculine authority. Despite getting their own sections on being visually driven actors who

⁵²⁰ Justin Lookadoo and Hayley DiMarco, *Dateable: Are You? Are They?* (Revell, 2003).

needed to stop looking lustfully at porn and at girls' bodies, boys actually, to me, seemed incidental to the whole enterprise.

This book and the small-group study around it planted the seeds of the present dissertation. As a teenager, much as it pains me to now admit, I enjoyed reading *Dateable*. I saw it as centered on my own experience, and appreciated that it gave me a clear roadmap for how girls and boys simply *were* at their cores. Despite attending a decidedly not-evangelical church myself, and despite already identifying as a feminist, I was taken in by the promise of simple rules in the confusing time of teenhood. The book—and, I would later learn, other books and organizations like it—argued that appropriate practice of girlhood was the key to living a successful Christian life, a life that was countercultural and that made seemingly old-fashioned practices not only cool but necessary. As I grew older and moved away from these ideas in my personal life, I continued to think about them, leading eventually to my undergraduate thesis on purity pledges and, much later, this dissertation.

In this dissertation, I have argued for the centrality of girlhood to evangelicalism by looking at it through the lens of nostalgia. Adults have used what I have called a pedagogy of nostalgia to teach girls who they were, who they would become, and the affective practices required to feel part of their evangelical relational communities. Within this framework, girls have been both students of nostalgia and objects of it, often simultaneously. While exploring evangelical nostalgia as it related to girlhood, this work also shows that white evangelical ideas of girlhood themselves changed over the course of the period covered in this research: the figure of the girl in the 1940s was contrasted primarily with that of the woman, foregrounding age as a primary identity category. By the present day, however, the girl is contrasted more often with the figure of the boy, placing gender identity in the prime spot. This shift is related to shifts in the

world around the girls in question, and to the passage of time: while the figure of the girl is, to adults, always located in the past, empirical girls grow into women who have their own pedagogical and nostalgic ideas, shaped by (or against) their own past girlhoods, about how girls should be and the practices and feelings they should cultivate.⁵²¹

The story covered here began with the rise of neo-evangelicalism, the Christian movement spearheaded in the 1940s by Harold Ockenga, Billy Graham, and *Christianity Today* to describe a new evangelicalism, defining it against a prior fundamentalism. Neo-evangelicalism, among other things, decentered denominations and instead promoted inter- and nondenominational parachurch organizations, focusing on relationship over attachment to any one church. The new evangelicalism, building on the previous century's development and promotion of Sunday school, also focused many of its efforts on youth in a bid to counter the negative effects of what was perceived to be an increasingly secularized American society. The (vague) past was upheld as a place with higher morals, where it was easier to live an ideal Christian life, and was contrasted with the idea of godless communism also prevalent at this time. Youth, nostalgia, and nationalism were thus all tied together in the rise of modern white American evangelicalism, in a combination that would take different countercultural permutations, with varying prominence of the three elements, over the years.

Nostalgia, I argue, is not just a feeling in American evangelicalism but an affective practice—what Shannon Lee Dawdy has termed critical nostalgia, or the bringing back of objects and practices from the past in order to critique the present.⁵²² For white American evangelicals, that critique has amounted to a desire to redeem a fallen nation and by extent a fallen world, by

⁵²¹ I am indebted to Valerie Hey for the phrase “empirical girls” to denote actually existing girls as compared to idealized figurative ones. Hey, *The Company She Keeps*.

⁵²² Dawdy, *Patina*.

spreading not only Christian belief but critical-nostalgic practices at the core of which was gender practice. Instruction in those practices, and in the feeling cultivated by and around them, is what I have termed a pedagogy of nostalgia. As I have shown, critical nostalgia in the recent history of American evangelicalism has taken a variety of forms, but most often looks like counterculturalism; that is, building a relational subculture that draws from an idealized past to work against the perceived a- or immoral culture of the present. Evangelical critical nostalgia is an affective and pedagogical practice that binds evangelicals together as a community, across peer groups and through generations, and girlhood is the best place to see it.

This dissertation began with an analysis of evangelical summer camp, a relatively new addition to the summer-camp scene in the 1940s, where the nostalgia at the heart of white American evangelicalism was clear in its valorization of virgin wilderness and the idea of an all-Christian community therein. The past referent for this idealized wilderness varied: it was perhaps reminiscent of biblical wildernesses, in which campers could experience similar feelings to biblical figures like Abraham or even Jesus; of an imaginary past American wilderness devoid of people and ready to be claimed by white Christians; or even of Eden itself. The role of girls here was influenced less by their gender than by their age, although when in homosocial groups they would sometimes be instructed (and instruct each other) in appropriate Christian femininity. Though nostalgic pedagogy influenced gender practice in these environments, it was far more focused on the youth and nationalism pieces of the puzzle: by showing children what an all-Christian community could look like, campers could then go back to build such communities in secular society.

The meaning of evangelical girlhood in the early Cold War period was especially visible in the Pioneer Girls, a nationwide parachurch ministry especially for girls from elementary

through high school. Here, critical nostalgia more specifically shaped gender practice, though it appears gender was still a less important identity category than age. The valorization of the era of white American westward expansion loomed large for the organization, and girls within it were encouraged to embody a pioneer girlhood of self-sufficiency, outdoorsiness, piety, and, implicitly, whiteness. The organization promoted relationships not only between girls and each other or between girls and Christ but also between girls and women, making explicit the generationalism that anchors religious transmission through time in communities far beyond the Pioneer Girls.

By the 1990s, ideas around girlhood had shifted, likely due to an increased emphasis across evangelicalism on gender difference in response to the feminist and LGBT rights movements; gender thus began to supersede age as the defining characteristic of girlhood. The True Love Waits campaign showed that girls by now were considered largely in terms of being future women and instructed as such. While people are all temporally situated, girls were now encouraged to think of themselves as such, practicing an “old-fashioned” femininity toward a future self that would look upon her past self with approval and, potentially, nostalgia. In line with this temporal thinking, True Love Waits made explicit the idea that evangelicalism was a counterculture because of its commitment to practices of the past, in particular (in this case) the commitment to not have sex before marriage. True Love Waits hoped that by being countercultural in this way, its participants could redeem a fallen America and a fallen world. The time-traveling critical nostalgia that was part of True Love Waits also shed light on the relationality that is foundational to American evangelicalism, as participants pledged purity to honor not only God and their current friends and family but also their future children and

spouses. Critical, countercultural nostalgia thus placed girls in generational relationships within their communities in ways that had not yet come to pass.

Current-day sources in the world of evangelical girlhood indicate much the same. Social media influencing is its own form of pedagogy, and reading influencers' videos alongside more traditional Bible study guides reveals that the trend of the 1990s and early 2000s has continued: girls tend to be considered future women, and women are considered to be married. Thus, the prevailing implication is that young women who are not married remain girls in a network of relationship with peers, God, and their future husbands. Appropriate Christian girlhood is still built on the practice of a nostalgic counterculture and is positioned sometimes explicitly and sometimes more implicitly against mainstream feminism, which is often considered an angry movement where good Christian girls should be nice. Though the recipients of this pedagogy sometimes feel affectively restrained by it, they nevertheless find meaning in their Christian countercultural gender practice.

This project began as an ethnography of girls in Young Life. For a variety of reasons influenced by the pandemic, my access to that group was shut down three weeks into fieldwork, after a year of work getting access to the field site. I had already begun archival research to complement my intended ethnographic work in order to provide historical context, and I was able to change directions to instead trace ideas of relationality and nostalgia through the recent history of evangelical girlhood. This turned out to be important work, illuminating the history of the affective practices I had set out to study. Now that I have laid the groundwork on the history and pedagogy of evangelical nostalgia as it pertains to girlhood, I hope as I transform this work into a book to more extensively explore how those lessons have been received in both the past and the present.

To that end, I hope to find written-in copies of the manuals cited throughout this dissertation to further give voice to the girls addressed by the pedagogical materials explored here. Evangelicals commonly use marginalia as a devotional practice, and evidence of how owners of these books may have been using them will indicate how girls were receiving and transforming the lessons in nostalgia that they were taught. To that end, I also plan to interview more current-day girls about their experiences, and to rework the current chapter four into two chapters, one focused on contemporary pedagogical texts (including influencer videos) and responses to them, and the other on the ethnographic interviews. I hope that by reworking the chapters in this way, I will be better able to show not only where evangelical girlhood currently is, but where it might be going in the future—and what roles nostalgia, relationality, and temporality will play.

I also plan to research and write a chapter addressing the period when views of girlhood seem to have shifted from an emphasis on age to an emphasis on gender. Though I found some evidence for this in the SBC sources from the 1970s and 1980s explored in chapter three, this phenomenon deserves a deeper dive to explain how it happened. I suspect that it is no accident that a shift in thinking to girls-as-future-women occurred at the same time as the rise of the Christian right; just as Cold War politics influenced the pedagogy of evangelical girlhood in the 1950s, so too did Reagan-era politics influence it in that era. This new chapter will draw largely from materials published by Focus on the Family, an influential organization of this period that, among other things, taught evangelical followers what family roles and the gender roles within them should be. By the 1990s, the organization had begun publishing *Brio*, a magazine for girls, but its thinking around girlhood likely began earlier.

Those are the directions in which this particular work will go. I have also raised questions that will lead to new lines of research beyond it. I encourage other scholars working on white American evangelicalism to give more consideration to the role of nostalgia as an affective practice, and in particular the way it is taught to children within the movement. Book bans, restrictions on trans healthcare, and limits on reproductive freedom, as they manifest in the American right wing, have their roots in nostalgia for the same white Christian America discussed here as a practice of white American evangelicalism. Furthermore, many of these initiatives employ an argument about protected childhood and in particular appropriate gender performance, employing the nostalgia inherent in modern American views of (white) childhood and innocent girlhood, though the nostalgia itself is only just beginning to be deeply theorized in research on the topic. Critical nostalgia is present in less-right wing forms of evangelicalism, too; the return to Eden of the evangelical environmental movement comes to mind. By exploring the different ways critical nostalgia is practiced in evangelicalism, a deeper understanding of a difficult-to-define movement is possible.

Beyond this narrow subfield, too, this research points in directions toward which religious studies is already heading: the discipline is well into its affective turn, and childhood studies in religion is a small but growing subfield. Adding a temporal dimension to considerations of religious childhoods and relationality could reveal new ways of thinking about religion beyond what I have covered here. Ultimately, interrogating the interrelations of nostalgia, childhood, and relationality will likely yield new insights into the history and process of religious transmission across the religious field. I also urge scholars to consider age as a category of intersectional identity alongside race, gender, and religious identity. Too often, religious studies scholars studying gender and/or race focus on adults without specifying that

“adult” is just as much an identity category as any other; when scholarship considers experience though more categories of analysis, as I have shown, different aspects of a greater religious whole come to the fore.

This dissertation offers future avenues of study in other disciplines as well. In the relatively new and growing field of girlhood studies, under the gender studies umbrella, scholars have already drawn attention to the fact that girls and women are different and that girlhood should be theorized on its own terms. However, much of girlhood studies remains focused on action, assessing whether topics under study benefit girls or how to educate girls in feminism. The latter area shows a similarity to evangelical concerns about raising good Christian girls, and a comparative study of the two topics could yield interesting results; the pedagogy of girlhood across American subcultures may, in fact, be more consistent than it appears. A focus not on how certain affective practices benefit girls but instead on how they shape the figure of the girl and are changed by empirical ones allows girls to stand on their own terms. Sabha Mahmood famously noted that agency need not only refer to resistance to an oppressive system, and that is an approach that is important to keep in mind when considering a population marginalized by both gender and age.⁵²³ As an entry into girlhood studies, this work also shows how affective practice can affect not only how girlhood is experienced (a subject interrogated by many researchers cited in the present study) but also how it is conceptualized and transformed through time. Studies of other affective practices taught to girls will no doubt show other transformations.

In the present work, I have shown that nostalgia, and in particular critical nostalgia and a pedagogy thereof, is crucial to a greater understanding of white American evangelicalism, and that girls are the ideal figures through whom to see it. I hope that this exploration of one small (a

⁵²³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

term I use literally as well as figuratively to describe children) part of America's largest religious movement provides opportunities for further academic understanding, both along the lines described above and those I have not yet considered. One reaction I often got when explaining my research to strangers, even strangers in my own field of religious studies, has been incredulity that girls could possibly matter enough to write an entire dissertation on. I hope, with this work, that I have shown that not only do they matter—they are worth putting directly in the spotlight.

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