RESEARCH ARTICLE

Training the Porous Body: Evangelicals and the Ex-Gay Movement

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ABSTRACT   In this article, I examine how US evangelical opposition to LGBT rights stems from a unique understanding of sexuality and the person. As my respondents explained to me in over sixteen months of field research, evangelical rejection of LGBT individuals and practices is rooted not simply in prejudice but also in a culturally specific notion of personhood that requires Christian bodies to orient themselves to the divine. In evangelical Christianity, the body, along with its capacity to feel and communicate, is understood as a porous vessel receptive to communication with God. In contrast to a dominant idea that sexual orientations shape individual identities, sexuality within this religious world instead facilitates the movement of moral forces across individual bodies and geographic scales. Sexual desires and sexual acts are broadly understood in evangelical cosmology as communicative mediums for supernatural forces. This understanding of sexuality as a central component of moral agency shapes widespread practices of ostracism of people who identify as LGBT within evangelicalism and often leads to anti-LGBT political positions. Claiming an LGBT identity is seen as making one a distinct kind of person incommensurate with evangelical porosity. [*evangelical, sexuality, embodiment, United States*]

RESUMEN   En este artículo, examino cómo la oposición evangélica en Estados Unidos a los derechos de la comunidad LGBT proviene de un entendimiento único de la sexualidad y la persona. Como mis respondedores me explicaron en más de dieciséis meses de investigación de campo, el rechazo evangélico a individuos y prácticas LGTB está enraizado no simplemente en prejuicios sino también en una noción culturalmente específica de la condición de persona que requiere que los cuerpos cristianos se orienten en sí mismos hacia lo divino. En la cristiandad evangélica, el cuerpo, junto con su capacidad de sentir y comunicarse, se entiende como un recipiente poroso receptivo de comunicación con Dios. En contraste a una idea dominante que las orientaciones sexuales dan forma a las identidades individuales, la sexualidad dentro del mundo religioso, en cambio facilita el movimiento de fuerzas morales a través de cuerpos individuales y escalas geográficas. Los deseos sexuales y los actos sexuales son ampliamente entendidos en la cosmología evangélica como medios comunicativos para las fuerzas sobrenaturales. Este entendimiento de la sexualidad como un componente central de la agencia moral le da forma a las prácticas extendidas de ostracismo de las personas quienes se identifican como LGBT dentro del evangelicalismo y a menudo lleva a posiciones políticas anti-LGBT. Reivindicar una identidad LGBT se ve como el hacer un tipo distinto de persona inconmensurable con la porosidad evangélica. [*evangélica, sexualidad, corporeización, Estados Unidos*]

I met Virginia Simmonds in the lobby of the evangelical North End Church one Sunday morning in 2010 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. It was "Small Group Sunday," where small Bible-study groups filled the building's circular

hallway to recruit new members. Even among the dozens of tables in the cavernous church lobby, Virginia's table stood out, its banner emblazoned with the text "Freedom from Homosexuality." I walked up to her and introduced myself, telling her that I was an anthropologist researching Bible-study groups, and that although I was not a Christian myself, I was interested in learning more about her group. With an outstretched hand and an enthusiastic smile, Virginia invited me to observe her support group for Christians who wanted to "leave homosexuality," as they describe it. I stood chatting with her for a few minutes, with "Freedom from Homosexuality" hanging from the table between us. I was struck by Virginia's tenacity in repeatedly bringing out that banner to advertise her group to the thousands of church members who milled about the church lobby. I wondered what motivated her to keep bringing out this banner.

Since the late 1970s, when Jerry Falwell railed against "sodomites" and the "homosexual agenda," an organized, white-evangelical-led movement has worked to challenge every extension of civil rights for individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans. In some cases, the language of these interests has not changed. In 2014, Franklin Graham, the son of evangelical leader Billy Graham, celebrated the curtailment of LGBT rights under Putin in Russia, stating: "Isn't it sad, though, that America's own morality has fallen so far that on this issue—protecting children from any homosexual agenda or propaganda—Russia's standard is higher than our own?"[1] The enduring homophobia of evangelical Christianity creates a conundrum for same-sex-desiring evangelicals,[2] who risk being ostracized if they openly identify as LGBT.

This article situates evangelical opposition to LGBT identity in a schema of personhood and embodiment that is characteristic of evangelical traditions. The embodied nature of evangelical Christianity is well documented within the ethnographic literature. This literature shows that the evangelical body, along with its capacity to feel and communicate, is understood as a vessel for God (Luhrmann 2004). The body's porosity (Taylor 2007) makes it a battleground for broader spiritual forces: God speaks through the body (Brahinsky 2012), and evangelicals work to develop tools to hear God (Harding 2001; Luhrmann 2007, 2012).

Evangelicalism is thus characterized by a unique understanding of the person and a corollary epistemology where individuals learn to understand themselves as porous to supernatural forces. This porous subjectivity involves several qualities. First, it is relational. Evangelical personhood understands the body as constructed through relationships—to supernatural forces, to family members, and to other Christians. The orientation of this self should be toward God and not toward selfish pursuits. Second, emotions and embodied experiences are communicative; they contain messages from the divine and other supernatural forces. Third, this porosity is broadly understood as requiring heterosexuality. Individuals who experience what they describe as "unwanted same-sex attraction" often express a belief that

identifying as gay or lesbian makes one incapable of maintaining a relationship with God. This belief is also evident in extensive experiences of ostracism, where parents, friends, and family members often disavow individuals who claim an LGBT identity. Just as evangelicalism is organized around an understanding that bodies are porous to supernatural forces, it is also defined by a commitment to heterosexuality. Here, I show how this unique understanding of sexuality within evangelicalism is paired with this view that the body is porous. In this religious worldview, sexuality is not a link to a unique identity, a position advocated by the LGBT movement, but is instead understood as facilitating the movement of good and evil forces through bodies and across geographic scales. Rather than originating in the subject, sexual desire here links one to an expansive moral universe with widespread ethical consequences.

Evangelical rejection of LGBT individuals and practices, then, is rooted not simply in prejudice. Instead, a culturally specific notion of personhood and a set of beliefs about how Christian bodies should orient themselves to the divine directly shape opposition to nonheterosexual identities. Evangelicals who adopt an LGBT identity are broadly understood as no longer capable of maintaining a relationship with God, and they are often ostracized from the community.[3] Just as the individual bodies of LGBT individuals are seen within this religious culture as no longer porous to God, maintaining relationships with people who identify as LGBT—even close family members—is often seen as a threat to one's own relationship with God.

This unique understanding of sexuality makes sexual desires and sexual acts primary sites for articulating, or defying, this religious order. As sexuality is understood in this worldview as allowing for the movement of moral forces, sexual orientation becomes a primary means through which this religious world is defined. While many evangelicals told me that same-sex sexuality is a sin like any other sin, in practice I did not encounter any other issue that inspired such forms of ostracism in the community. Opposing LGBT rights also inspired more evangelical political passion than any other issue, with the exception of abortion. As I will show, heterosexuality defines the boundaries of this community.

Here, I explore evangelical opposition to LGBT rights in the context of this emphasis on an embodied religious practice. Through more than sixteen months of research with evangelicals, including among members of the ex-gay movement and the Gay Christian Network, I found that many evangelicals believe that one cannot be gay, lesbian, or trans and at the same time be a Christian. Same-sex desire and identity are broadly understood within this cultural milieu as making the body buffered from God. Marital heterosexuality is seen as the only form of sexuality that brings one closer to God, whereas same-sex desire is framed as either a source of evil or of selfishness.

While several scholars have studied the ex-gay movement (e.g., Beckstead 2001; Erzen 2006; Robinson and

Spivey 2015; Waidzunas 2013; Wolkomir 2001), this is the first study that situates this movement within a broader exploration of ideas about gender and sexuality in the white evangelical religious culture. This is important because most of the leaders of the ex-gay movement come from this tradition and its key institutions. For example, the organization Focus on the Family—the largest and most influential white evangelical institution—launched the ex-gay conference Love Won Out in 1998 and hosted the conference until it was sold to Exodus International in 2009. Far from marginal, the experiences of these Christian participants in the ex-gay movement help to articulate the role of sexuality within the broader white evangelical culture that continues to dominate the contested domain of sexual citizenship (Weeks 1998) in the United States.

In August 2017, a group of evangelical leaders emphasized this perspective in a "Christian manifesto," published in opposition to the allegedly increasing presence of homosexual and trans communities.[4] The "Nashville Statement," as it is known, critiques an increasingly "post-Christian" Western culture, instructing the church to not "blend into the spirit of the age." The focus of the statement is an opposition to same-sex sexual relations and transgender rights. Article 7 reads, "WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption." Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, described the statement as "an expression of love for same-sex attracted people." These claims are rooted in an understanding that individuals can only belong in God's family if they renounce their same-sex desire.

The research completed for this study occurred in white-majority spaces, ones that engaged with a theological tradition stemming from a segregated US.[5] Multiracial congregations remain a rarity in the US today (see Emerson and Kim, 2003), with roughly nine out of ten congregations comprised of one dominant racial group (see Scheitle and Dougherty 2010). When the media reports about evangelical voters or evangelical political views, they are almost exclusively referring to white evangelicals, whose politics are a product of this history of segregation. Most African American Christian traditions, similar to white evangelicalism, prioritize heterosexuality (see Pitt 2010). However, the vast majority of Religious Right leaders and activists and ex-gay movement participants have been white. African American Protestants, including those that fit the theological definition of evangelical, tend to vote in opposing ways to white evangelicals (Jones and Francis 2012). Race clearly plays a role in the sexual politics stemming from these theological positions. Here, it is not possible to sufficiently theorize the relevance of race to these sexual politics, but I do want to acknowledge that this exploration is based in a study of white evangelicalism. Important questions remain about how Latin American, African American, Native American, and Asian American evangelical traditions understand porosity and sexuality.

Throughout this research, I found that most evangelicals originally experience same-sex desire as a threat to their religious identity and believe that their desire makes them a certain type of person incommensurable with evangelicalism. Some individuals work to challenge this binary but often experience significant consequences for this stance.

THE EX-GAY MOVEMENT

The ex-gay movement is led by Christians experiencing what they call "unwanted same-sex attraction." It is composed of support groups, conferences, self-help books, and residential treatment centers all geared to help people "leave homosexuality." Exodus International (hereafter "Exodus"), the most prominent ex-gay organization in the US, formed in California in 1976. A founding member of the organization described the first gathering to me as "a group of gay Christian men who didn't want to be gay anymore." They got together to pray and to craft a national organization to help people leave homosexuality. Over the next thirty-six years, Exodus grew to establish one hundred and fifty ministries across the world. Between 1976 and 2013, Exodus organized a yearly conference with around one thousand attendees. Although formally a nondenominational Christian organization, it primarily drew evangelical Christians (Ponticelli 1996), and its annual conference offered worship, prayer, and music similar to those of most large evangelical services.

In 1977, a year after the formation of Exodus, the Evangelical Christian pop singer Anita Bryant launched the group Save Our Children to overturn a Dade County, Florida, ordinance that prohibited antigay discrimination. In the process, Bryant inadvertently helped to spur two national movements: the Religious Right and the LGBT movement. Activists such as Bryant used the "homosexual threat" as a lightning rod to mobilize white evangelicals to engage in politics (Dowland 2009, 2015; Fetner 2008). Since the late 1970s, white evangelicals have remained one of the most influential voting blocs in the US (Pew Research Center 2012, 2014), broadly supporting a Religious Right politics opposing LGBT rights (Balmer 2010; Diamond 2000; Flippen 2011; Harding 1991, 2001; Kintz 1998). In turn, the formation of an antigay movement helped to spur a national lesbian and gay rights movement (Fetner 2008).

Importantly, not all forms of Christianity oppose LGBT rights (Wilcox 2009), and many Christians experience no conflicts between LGBT and Christian identities (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). There are many Christian spaces that allow members to embody nonheteronormative gender and sexual identities and practices (Sumerau and Schrock 2011). A number of congregations have made statements and adopted policies welcoming Christians who identify as gay, lesbian, and trans into their congregations. Yet evangelicalism as a whole has retained a political and ethical stand condemning same-sex relationships as immoral.[6]

Many individuals resolve the tension between a sexual and a religious identity by claiming an LGBT identity

and leaving conservative evangelicalism, either joining gay-affirming Christian congregations (Perry 1992; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Wilcox 2009) or leaving Christianity altogether. However, the costs of leaving evangelicalism can be great, often involving the loss of community and family as well as a system of meaning that provides an identity, cosmology, and ethical order.

Over the past few years, many prominent ex-gay ministries have closed, including Exodus, largely due to pressure from LGBT rights groups, particularly the Gay Christian Network (now the Q Christian Fellowship). In 2013, the president and board of directors of Exodus shut down the organization, issuing an apology for harm done to LGBT people.[7] Moreover, the American Psychological Association (2009) has issued a criticism of sexual conversion therapy, and a growing number of states have passed laws making it illegal for licensed counselors to practice conversion therapy with youth. Some see these changes in the ex-gay movement as a sign that the broader evangelical community is becoming more accepting of people who identify as LGBT. However, despite these changes in the infrastructure of the ex-gay movement, the broader evangelical culture remains deeply committed to opposing LGBT rights.

To understand how anti-LGBT views still infuse evangelical culture, I conducted sixteen months of ethnographic research in white-dominated evangelical spaces between 2008 and 2016, primarily in Colorado Springs, and completed more than one hundred interviews with evangelical leaders and congregants. To study the ex-gay movement, I interviewed twenty adults who either claimed to have left homosexuality or who described themselves as ex-ex-gay,[8] conducted interviews with counselors and parents of Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction, and participated in a support group. I also attended two Gay Christian Network conferences, in 2016 and 2017.

The Gay Christian Network (GCN) started an annual conference in 2001, and since the closure of Exodus, the conference has become a central space where LGBT Christians gather. On the first day of the 2016 GCN conference in Houston, I met an evangelical filmmaker working on a documentary on evangelical GCN participants. I told her I would love to interview some of them, and she leaned in and asked, "Well, do you want to meet people who are 'Side A' or 'Side B'?" "Side A," I responded hesitantly. "Well that is going to be hard, there are not too many 'Side A's' who still identify as evangelical," she retorted. I had stumbled unintentionally into what is known at the conference as the "Great Debate."[9] Both sides of this debate agree that people are born with particular sexual orientations. But the conference is divided between those who believe this extends to full acceptance of same-sex relationships and transgender identities (Side A) and those who believe the Bible condemns same-sex sexual relationships (Side B).[10] Side B is not an ex-gay position because they believe LGBT identities cannot be changed; they just believe there is no theological support for same-sex sexual relationships. At the conference, there are special Side B dinners and workshops addressing the debate, and it is common for presenters and attendees to identify themselves as supporters of one side or another. However, within the broader evangelical community, even the Side B position is controversial because it rests on the need to accept people with nonheterosexual identities, even if those people don't act on their desires. This refusal represents the extent of evangelical commitments to heterosexuality.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND SELFISH SEXUALITY

Sexual desires and sexual acts are broadly understood in evangelical cosmology as communicative mediums for supernatural forces. This belief is reflected in the extensive corpus of evangelical sex and marriage manuals (DeRogatis 2014). This literature reveres marital heterosexuality as providing tools to develop closeness to God.[11] In contrast, all nonheterosexual experiences are framed as taking one away from God's desires and design. Sexual attractions and sex acts are powerful symbols of the body's porousness and are widely described as having supernatural significance (DeRogatis 2009). At least part of this emphasis stems from a view that sexual organs are openings to the body and thus are sites of literal porosity—and a corollary view that sexual intercourse involves penetration not only of the physical body but also of the soul.

These messages about the spiritual implications of sex recur throughout the ex-gay movement. Books and workshops often focus on the message that sexual encounters contain spiritual messages. Take, for example, a testimony given by Vernon Burke, an ex-gay activist I saw speak in Colorado Springs. In a speech to a group of young evangelical college students, he described going from a gay-identified man to a heterosexual-identified Christian youth pastor married to a former prostitute. The climax of his story involved a postcoital encounter on his wedding night where he clung to his new wife and wept. "We had both felt so dark, and now we felt so pure," Burke wept anew to the room full of students, contrasting his former experiences with gay sex to the purity he felt with heterosexual marital sex. Over the course of his testimony he shared a slideshow featuring pictures of his wedding and children. At the end of the story, his wife and children actually walked into the room, evidence of his transformation.

This mobilization of the family as a hedge against sin is not coincidental. Sexual sin is imagined to affect not only individual sinners but also possibly their children or future children, their community, and their nation. In 2010, I attended a youth revival at an evangelical church in Colorado Springs where thousands of teens gathered for a weekend of workshops and worship music. One session exemplified this understanding of illicit sexuality both as a potential source of purity or defilement and as a threat to the moral community. In a room packed with hundreds of primarily white suburban teens and preteens, the psychologist Dr. Spencer West preached, "The devil says it's ok to have sex with anyone. If you overcome the devil's messages and

maintain your purity, Jesus will give you authority over nations. See, there's a reason why you don't let people kiss you and fondle you. See, the devil has a plan to take your authority; God wants you to keep it." All nonmarital sexual acts are seen within evangelicalism as potential sites of spiritual impurity. As is often the case in evangelical discussions, sexual practices are understood as facilitating moral forces. Virginity until marriage allows Jesus to confer power to individuals, which can lead to political power. In contrast, premarital sexual experiences destroy this power and are influenced by evil.

In contrast to marital heterosexual acts, same-sex desire is frequently portrayed in conservative evangelicalism and the ex-gay movement as taking one away from God. A workshop at the Exodus international conference in 2010 titled "Breaking the Cycle of Sin" highlighted this understanding. Nick Gabin, a leading writer and lecturer in the ex-gay movement, coached the one hundred and twenty men in the room on how to stop engaging in same-sex sexual activities. Going through a graph charting Satan's temptations to stop following God, he framed same-sex relationships as inherently selfish, saying: "The most common response of people with SSA [same-sex attraction] is: I deserve to be happy. I see. I want. With 'I' as the common denominator." The assumption is that where God promises a fulfilling relationship with him, Satan works to tempt people away from God, and same-sex attraction is a response to this temptation insofar as it orients people to the self. He told the group, "God is giving us trials. The enemy can deceive and steal from you, he cannot have me, he can steal from me the joy that God has promised me. These trials are testing the sufficiency of our relationship with God."

The message that same-sex desire takes one away from God was repeated throughout stories of individual participants in the ex-gay movement. Dustin Henry, who worked for a conservative evangelical organization lobbying against gay rights when I met him, is a vocal supporter of the position that homosexuality is a choice and that sexual-orientation change is possible. Dustin lived down the road from me in Colorado Springs, and we often met at a coffee shop near our houses where he loved to bring his two Schnauzers. In his late forties but looking much younger, Dustin sported short red hair and a slim build and was always immaculately but casually dressed. He was raised in a mainline Christian home and describes committing to Christ at the age of thirteen, around the same time he started struggling with same-sex attractions.

In college, Dustin came out to his Episcopalian priest, who then came out to Dustin as also gay and introduced him to gay-affirming theology. This religious support provided Dustin with the confidence to finally identify as a gay man and embrace his same-sex attractions. He eventually moved to Washington, DC, where, in his words:

> I knew I could be out and proud and it wouldn't be a big deal. And it wasn't! For thirteen years. And, um, in a way it was a big deal because in a sense I didn't feel quite right about it. But, I was going to a gay church, lived in a gay neighborhood, I went to a gay gym, I was in a gay bowling league, I was in a gay volleyball league, I lived in a gay world. I had a gay boss: he had a gay boss. I mean, life in some ways was really awesome, in terms of being out. But, you know, deep down, I was still like, I'm not sure this is really right.

Though his immediate world was affirming of his sexual orientation, internally Dustin often questioned his sexuality. At the age of thirty-five, Dustin had a born-again experience where he felt God viscerally enter his body. He told me, "Now I call it my theophany: where I came face to face with God and came back to my senses." He went on, "I was in this really, really low place, and I literally felt surrounded by white light and by grace and mercy. And I knew that I was forgiven if I just would turn back to him. And um, it was a really profound experience, I like cried for forty-five minutes because it was so real and palpable, the hand of God ministering to me and that he had a real path laid out for me." After this experience, he began to change his life in dramatic ways. At first he didn't know what his new Christianity meant for his sexuality, but after several weeks he decided that homosexuality was not in God's plan. Dustin said, "He [God] had a better way, and I started the journey out of being gay identified, which is not just like a snap of the finger. It's a long, hard process in terms of learning to submit to the lordship of Christ."

For Dustin, developing an evangelical Christian habitus took the form of epistemological training around his experiences of feeling and desire. He contrasted this submission to Christ with a hedonism he believes is endemic in gay culture: "You've been so used to doing whatever you wanted to with whomever you wanted to, anytime you wanted, you know! 'Cause that's the way gay life is for most guys—you pretty [much], especially if you're attractive enough, you can pretty much do whatever you want, when you want, with whoever you want. And it can be super . . . it can be fulfilling on some level, but it can also be just super self-centered, you know." He came to see same-sex sexual identity and relationships as rooted in selfishness and thus as taking him away from God. Dustin's conversion to evangelicalism left him with a new understanding of his emotions and interior life; instead of pursuing pleasure or his own passions, he prioritized a relationship with God. His new focus became how to redirect his interior life to connect to God, and his religious conversion inspired subsequent political and sexual conversions. In this new religious world, he could only see same-sex sexuality as taking him away from God, as a selfish act.

Dustin explained to me that since becoming a Christian, the focus of his life changed from selfishness to seeking union with God: "Before, I was pretty much living the life of my own wills, wants, desires, my own agenda, my schedule, without thinking that much about what God would think about what was happening in my mind . . . I just did what I wanted, when I wanted, with whoever I wanted. There is

a certain freedom to that, but it doesn't necessarily satisfy, in the deepest sense of your being." For Dustin, his first embodied encounter with God helped to nurture an intimate relationship that reshaped his interior life. He came to see same-sex romance and intimacy not only as shallow but also as an experience that would make him an alien in his newfound spiritual world. In these narratives, it is as if same-sex acts and desires make the body impervious to God.

Evangelicalism articulates a unique understanding of sexuality where sexual desire and sexual encounters are not products of an interior essence but are understood as facilitating the movement of moral forces. Nonheteronormative identities then become sources of moral pollution, inhibiting the presence of God in the individual body and the Christian body politic.

GAY CHRISTIANS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF GOD'S IMAGINED KINGDOM

Understanding sexuality as foundational to—as constitutive of—subjective experience is a decidedly modern, Western project (Foucault 1990a, 1990b; Halperin 1989; Padgug 1979), and this understanding has come to dominate contemporary LGBT politics.[12] Michel Foucault (1978) famously described the development of these categories as a late nineteenth-century transition from the "aberration" of the sodomite into the new "species" of the homosexual, from an act into a state of being. This understanding that sexual orientations shape specific identities has come to define a popular LGBT movement. Many people in the US now believe that one's sexual desires are shaped by biology (see Weeks 1995), an essentialist position that may be either deeply felt or strategic (Spivak 1990). This scientific explanation has created the notion that people are, to use a popular song about LGBT rights, "born this way." However, for many evangelical Christians, becoming queer means leaving Christianity, and this perception leads many Christian parents to disown their queer children. I contend that this emphasis on identity makes LGBT rights so contentious within evangelicalism. While same-sex sexual acts are broadly understood as sinful, the kind of personhood implied in choosing an LGBT identity is often seen within evangelicalism as making that person no longer open to God.

This understanding that sexual desires make one a particular kind of person—that desire shapes identity—is not universally held, and these differences in understanding are not just about religion. In the US, racial differences shape how individuals frame same-sex sexual acts (Snorton 2013) and transgendered identities (Valentine 2007). Anthropologists have shown that sexual subjectivity is based on far more than the types of people to whom one is sexually attracted. Rather, sexual personhood is shaped by intersecting identities and cultural influences, not the least of which is race. This may be one way to help explain the whiteness of the Religious Right and the ex-gay movements. Historically, white racial identity was defined by respectability, a combination of sexual purity, normative gender roles, and

patriarchal family values.[13] In turn, African American Christians have sometimes adopted a "politics of respectability" in an attempt to counter racist stereotypes about black sexuality and to prove their moral worth (see Higginbotham 1993; Hopkins 2004). While this politics of respectability has influenced black Christian thought as well, it has come to define white evangelicalism. White evangelicals have tended to prioritize these sexual norms as central to religious life. As articulated in the 2017 "Nashville Statement," opposition to queer people and policies is defined as the main concern for white evangelicals.

Fieldwork with evangelical Christians who identify as LGBT and their allies demonstrates how sexual identity largely determines the boundaries of this religious community. I came to see that just as evangelicals train their bodies to become porous, they use similar social practices to invite God's presence into the home and community. For example, pastors encourage a variety of practices to ensure the presence of God in one's life, often called the presence of the Holy Spirit. Worship music, prayer, spousal relationships, family rituals, and socializing with other Christians (called fellowship) all serve to invite the presence of God.

In contrast, same-sex identity and desire are understood as possible sources of spiritual impurity to the individual body, and LGBT individuals are often portrayed as sites of impurity in the body of Christian believers. For example, Franklin Graham, the son of evangelical leader Billy Graham, in 2016 warned of the need for Christians to defend themselves against LGBT children. In a radio interview, he stated:

> We have allowed the Enemy [the devil] to come into our churches. I was talking to some Christians and they were talking about how they invited these gay children to come into their home and to come into the church and that they were wanting to influence them. And I thought to myself, they're not going to influence those kids; those kids are going to influence those parent's children. What happens is we think we can fight by smiling and being real nice and loving. We have to understand who the enemy is and what he wants to do. He wants to devour our homes. He wants to devour this nation and we have to be so careful who we let our kids hang out with. We have to be so careful who we let into the churches.[14]

Graham links concerns over sexuality across multiple scales. In this understanding, befriending LGBT children is an opening for Satan to enter not only the family but also the nation. In contrast to dominant assumptions that sexual desire is the seat of an individual identity, sexuality for evangelicals is seen as facilitating the movement of good or evil forces into and out of porous bodies and across geographic scales. Statements from evangelical leaders like Graham or the "Nashville Statement" demonstrate institutional commitment to these ideas, but these beliefs also shape broad practices of ostracism within the evangelical culture.

I came to appreciate the ubiquity of these beliefs in conversations with Amber Cantorna, whom I met at the Gay Christian Network in Houston in 2016. I was then able

to interview her in Denver later that year. Amber told me that Christianity had been a part of her life from childhood: she remembered singing her first church solo when she was only two and praying with all of her stuffed animals. Her father spent decades working at Focus on the Family. When she was in her early twenties, Amber fell in love with a female roommate and was at first confused by the experience.[15]

Eventually, Amber started attending a gay-affirming church an hour away. When she came out to her parents as a lesbian, her father walked out of the room saying, "I have nothing to say to you." Her parents eventually cut off all communication with her. A few years later, when Amber married her now wife, her new church community filled the otherwise empty pews designated for her family. Amber said she thinks her parents believe that accepting her lifestyle would have put their own salvation at stake, and thus their only option was to cut off communication from their daughter. Her father spent his career working for an organization that prioritizes family, but when it came to his own daughter, he could not accept her identity as a lesbian, which placed her out of bounds of the family. It is as though choosing an LGBT identity makes one a certain type of person no longer recognized as family or as Christian.

Often, evangelicals lose more than familial relationships when they claim an LGBT identity or even when they come out in support of LGBT people. Mary-Jean's experience is indicative of these types of losses. A trans woman who lived as a man through her forties before transitioning from male to female, she is now a well-known LGBT activist in Colorado Springs. "I remind everyone to remember the 'T' in LGBT," she told me. Her activism is largely inspired by her experiences coming out as trans. Before her transition, she was a lead Bible-study teacher at a large church and counted executives from Focus on the Family as close friends. When she came out, she lost her marriage, her ability to see her children, her church friends and position at her church, and, finally, her job at a non-Christian firm[16] before eventually finding a new community in a gay-affirming Christian church.

This kind of ostracism often takes place even for heterosexual-identified people who take positions affirming LGBT people. One mother from Southern California whom I met at GCN in 2016 told me that two of her three adult children now identify as gay. After years of hoping to change their children's orientations, she and her husband decided to accept and support their children. One day, the father, in a moment of parental pride, posted a happy photo of their daughter's same-sex wedding to his Facebook page. The next day, elders from their church invited him to a meeting where he was told he could no longer share photos of his children on social media if he wanted to stay in the church. The parents soon left that church and began attending a Third Way church, which does not take a stand on LGBT issues and welcomes both gay-affirming beliefs and beliefs that LGBT relationships are a sin. In choosing to support their children, they lost not only their original church community but also relationships with their families, including their parents, siblings, and nieces and nephews.

Another mother at GCN spoke about how accepting her transgender son meant losing the rest of her family. The previous Christmas they had to celebrate alone for the first time. The mother described GCN as "my family now" and described how her church attempted to excommunicate her son when he transitioned his gender. These types of severed relationships are taking place at churches across the country and reflect a position advocated in the "Nashville Statement," which reads: "WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness." For Amber and Mary-Jean, and many other queer Christians, this ostracism occurs even when they maintain a relationship with God and a commitment to practicing Christianity. Today, "opposition to homosexuality has become a core component of identity for many evangelical individuals and institutions" (Watt 2002, 25). What many read as bigotry and intolerance, however, stems from this unique understanding of sexuality, where heteronormativity is a requirement for belonging in God's kingdom.

A growing group of Christian parents of LGBT kids—known as the Mama Bears—are forging new networks of support online, supporting Christian parents when their children come out as LGBT. However, a dominant response within evangelicalism continues to see queer identities as incompatible with Christianity. Just as the same-sex-desiring body is seen as no longer porous to God's presence, maintaining a relationship with LGBT Christians and their allies is broadly understood as potentially damaging Christian families and communities and as inhibiting the presence of God. This unique understanding of sexuality counters the now common understanding that sexual desires connote a state of being and instead sees heterosexuality as a moral good and requirement for establishing a religious culture.

THE CATEGORY OF THE PERSON AND IDEOLOGIES OF DESIRE

What we see in evangelicalism is a parallel understanding of the relationship between identity and sexual desire to that held by the mainstream LGBT movement. In dominant LGBT politics, the message is that one's desires shape an identity and that this identity must be protected by legal measures to prevent discrimination. Evangelicalism is organized around teaching individuals to understand themselves and their bodies in a culturally specific way. In this schema, only one form of sexual desire is linked to the identity of evangelical; all others are framed as incompatible with Christian personhood.

The anthropological record shows that personhood is an achieved status, often taking place over a lifetime (Christoffersen-Deb 2012), and there is a long history of anthropological studies of personhood (Appell-Warren, 2014). Marcel Mauss (1985) describes the very category

of the person as "a category of the human mind." Charles Taylor (2007), in conversation with the ideas of Mauss, argues that secular, modern selves are "buffered" from supernatural forces, in contrast to premodern porous selves, which are forced to contend with supernatural forces, such as demons and spirits. For Taylor, these categories of personhood exist at different times, in modernity or premodernity. I argue, instead, that such concepts of the person can exist coterminously. It is just that in a secular age, religious mobilizations require specific training in embodying porous personhood.

This understanding of the subject as porous is rooted in a unique understanding of agency, and evangelical practice involves epistemological training whereby individuals learn to read bodily experiences as spiritual messages. Scholars of religious movements have shown how religious practice often involves yielding individual agency to metaphysical others (see Mahmood 2006; Mittermaier 2010). Thus, agency is often understood in religious practice as rooted outside of the subject. Evangelical porosity is similarly rooted in a yielding of agency, which takes a particular form of bodily training in which individuals learn to read feelings and bodily sensations as messages from God. Christian media and pastoral messages often focus on tools for developing porous selves.

The text of the "Nashville Statement" reveals how this construct of an idealized receptive self permeates evangelical ideology and informs other aspects of its worldview. From its first passages, the document expresses these values as central to evangelical morality. The preamble asserts, "We cannot know ourselves truly without truly knowing him who made us. We did not make ourselves. We are not our own." Here, the body and psyche are not autonomous or separate, but rather are owned by God. Adult converts to evangelicalism often described their conversions to me as experiences of porosity, telling me: "I felt a warmth move up and down my body for minutes," "I was flooded by a sense of love, making me cry for hours," and "My legs felt like molasses." From this bodily experience came a sense of truth about God. People would say, "After that I finally *knew* God exists, that he loves me." Experiences of God in the body thus erased doubt and conveyed an unquestionable truth.

This cultural valorization of porosity occurs in other contexts, too, and is a frequent topic of sermons. One Sunday morning, standing under two giant television screens, Pastor Alex preached, "Don't let the soil of our hearts become dirt that nothing can grow in!" He told a story about his recent foray into gardening and described how, despite his best efforts, his plot remained "gangly" and his garden was "just dirt." As he explained, "I didn't know how to treat the soil. But, professional gardeners who use the right fertilizers and topsoil know how to make soil, *not leaving it as just dirt*. We need soil to grow things, and we can *turn our hearts to dirt*." The subtext of this sermon stresses the importance of cultivating one's emotional landscape to be porous: fertile soil where God's influence can grow.

For an individual believer, developing this quality means cultivating particular dispositional capacities to communicate with God. However, this is also understood to entail spiritual risk. As porous entities, the body and soul are also open to evil forces. Most evangelicals believe in what they call *spiritual warfare,* an understanding that an ongoing battle exists between good and evil forces. During research in Colorado Springs, I was told on several occasions that I could not participate in a particular group or activity because it involved spiritual warfare and that my status as a non-Christian—someone not able to call on God's protection—would leave me vulnerable to spiritual attack.

In multiple ways, evangelicals commented to me that this godly porosity is available only to heterosexual individuals. Coreen Clemens's story is instructive here, insofar as converting to evangelicalism required her to understand both her body as porous and her sexual attractions to other women as unacceptable. I met Coreen at an Exodus International Conference I attended in 2010. Someone had suggested I speak with her about my research. Coreen asked if I was a Christian, and I told her I was not. She responded immediately, "Well, the God I believe in doesn't create random encounters, sister, everything he does has a purpose. I'd love to talk to you." Her button-up shirt and knee-length shorts, shoulder-length hair, and sporty sunglasses made her look, to me, like an evangelical member of the Indigo Girls.

Coreen recounted to me a history full of dramatic disruptions to her sexual identity. She was raised with a Christian identity, but in college took on a lesbian identity. She told me that at times she embraced her gay identity, and described having only gay friends, gay doctors, and going on gay vacations. In her thirties, she converted to evangelicalism through a close mentorship with her evangelical brother and soon found a support group for "strugglers" (people who struggle with same-sex attraction). Coreen described the importance of developing a new identity in her quest to leave homosexuality and stated that she no longer identified with the term ex-gay: "I used to be gay and had that identity, then had an ex-gay identity. But, our identity shapes our behavior, and that wasn't all God wanted for me! God showed me women can love power tools and still be women! My core identity is a child of God!" Being a "child of God," for Coreen and for many Christians, precludes her ability to also be a "lesbian."

Coreen described her conversion as having caused her both to see her body as porous and to read her same-sex desire as a source of evil: "When I had my born-again experience, the next day I called an ex-gay ministry, and got a Bible tape from my brother that day. I found a church nearby and went and it was very charismatic. I was shy, got there late and left early. I isolated myself away from other gay people and was starved for attention and companionship. I was worried that people would think that I was making a pass at them. I didn't know where these fears came from, but I think, 'It's just Satan being an asshole [laughs]!'" Coreen learned through this church and the broader evangelical culture to see her

own feelings of insecurity and alienation not as products of personal experience or personal failure but as products of a cosmic battle so that insecurity translated into "Satan being an asshole." This understanding allowed Coreen to see her emotions not as personal but as potential products of external forces. This epistemological training makes emotion and desire link to a supernatural order. This does not mean that evangelicals are suspicious of feeling; indeed, feeling is a primary modality for communicating with God. Feelings are understood not just as an individuated experience but also as communicative tools with the divine. Of course, attempting to join a community that has stigmatized her could also cause these feelings, but Coreen chose to read her feelings as part of a cosmic battle and as attempts to keep her from God.

Coreen's narrative also suggests how heterosexuality is grafted onto an understanding of the porous self so that renouncing queerness became a requirement for developing a relationship with God. Understanding her body and its feelings as communicative tools—understanding insecurity as a tool of Satan—also required her to see her same-sex attraction as incongruent with her Christian self, shown in her opposing being a lesbian and being a "child of God." Developing this internal capacity to allow God to permeate and shape one's life defines belonging in what evangelicals call the Kingdom of God.

EVANGELICAL SEXUALITY

We can see that within evangelical culture, sexuality is not understood as a key expression of one's true self—as it is often conveyed in mainstream LGBT politics—but instead is represented as a link to a supernatural world and as a path to one's spiritual identity. Virginia's tenacity in advertising her group on "Freedom from Homosexuality" and reaching out to other strugglers rests in a belief that reshaping sexual desires is crucial to remaining within God's community. Sexual acts and desires can either bring one further in line with what is understood as God's desires or can make one's body incompatible with a relationship with God, steering one's body instead either into selfishness or sin. Amber's and Mary-Jean's stories also show how claiming an LGBT identity for Christians often involves not only the feared loss of one's embodied relationship with God but also the potential loss of one's family, friends, and religious community.

Shortly before concluding my fieldwork in 2010, I attended one of Virginia's support groups. Five of us sat around her comfortable, suburban living room. Her husband, Brad, participated in the group discussion while their two rescue dogs lounged between us. Like many evangelical homes I came to know, their home was peaceful and warm, exuding an intense calm. After an initial prayer, Virginia led the group with a discussion of the importance of forgiveness and healing, and we all talked about how we react to pain and hurt. A theme was how to break out of our patterns that we learned in childhood. Virginia talked about how useful journaling is as a way to process your emotions, and most of the group agreed, and talked about how useful journaling

had been for them. The discussion was a familiar offering of generic self-help interspersed with Christian terminology, where ungodly and demonic emotions get us stuck in reactive patterns that lead to addictions. Throughout our conversations, participants didn't talk about their sexual identities or their sexual attractions. Instead, they engaged in the challenging work of renarrating their childhoods and trying to understand how their previous hurts shaped current harms, one of which they labeled as same-sex attraction. The subtext of the group, written on Virginia's scarlet banner, is that homosexuality is something from which individuals require freedom. The broader evangelical emphasis on heterosexual norms reinforces the notion that same-sex desire is incompatible with God.

Many LGBT Christians argue that there is no theological support for opposing LGBT relationships (see Vines 2015).[17] Yet, as in the "Nashville Statement," the broader evangelical culture denies this position, and white evangelicals continue to lead opposition to LGBT rights. Evangelical pastors and laypeople frequently told me that there is no ranking of sins, that homosexuality is one sin among many. But it became clear in my research, particularly through spending time with people who have left homosexuality and people who identify as ex-ex-gay, that in practice homosexuality is not treated simply as one of many sins—similar to, say, gluttony or greed—but that sexual sins carry a significant ethical weight in evangelicalism. I heard of no similar division for other sins in my fieldwork. People struggled with many habits and desires they considered sinful—pornography, marital infidelity, alcohol and drug addiction, overeating, selfishness, anger—but none received the vitriol directed at same-sex attraction. Lynne Gerber's (2011, 49) study of evangelical support groups similarly found that despite rhetorical attempts at "democratizing sins," there is, "in practice, a hierarchy of sins that measures sins of sexuality by a very different yardstick than those of judgment or of food and body size." None received the displacement of self, of unbearable feelings of nonbelonging, of expulsion from God's banquet that nonnormative, nonheterosexual, nonmarital sexual habits and desires received. It is as though sex is the fastest way out of God's benign kingdom. In practice, claiming an LGBT identity isn't seen as an act of sin. Instead, it is seen as a form of personhood incompatible with evangelical porosity

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NOTES

1. Quoted in Jonathan Capehart, "Franklin Graham's detestable anti-gay statements," *The Washington Post,* April 21, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2014/04/21/franklin-grahams-detestable-anti-gay-statements.

2. The ex-gay movement posits a unique understanding of sexuality. This movement rejects the claim that experiencing erotic attraction for individuals of the same sex makes one a lesbian, bisexual, or gay person. Instead, same-sex attraction is often portrayed as a psychological problem or addiction. This movement has developed its own lexicon to describe these views. People in this movement use the term SSA (same-sex attraction), refer to themselves as "strugglers" (struggling with same-sex attraction), "ever-straight" (never having experienced same-sex attraction), or "in lifestyle" (identifying as gay, bisexual, or lesbian).

3. There is a growing network of parents who are affiliated with GCN, who call themselves the Mama Bears, who affirm their LGBT children, and who are expanding an online network to support other parents of queer kids. Many of these parents remain affiliated with evangelical and nonaffirming churches and are quietly working with pastors and other church leadership to show the harm that stems from anti-LGBT bias and theology.

4. See: https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement.

5. The European-American experience has shaped understandings of Christianity in significant ways. See Blum (2005), Blum and Harvey (2012), Emerson and Smith (2000), and Tranby and Hartmann (2008).

6. Some denominations, such as the United Methodists, are divided about their support for LGBT people and relationships (see Moon 2004).

7. Waidzunas (2013) argues that the organization had already largely changed its original message.

8. Many people who have left ex-gay movement refer to themselves as "ex-ex-gay" or as "ex-gay survivors."

9. For a discussion of these issues, see: https://www.gaychristian.net/the-great-debate.

10. Their position on transgender issues is complicated.

11. A wide variety of sexual practices, including kink, are seen as acceptable within evangelicalism, so long as they take place within the confines of heterosexual marriage (Burke 2016).

12. Outside the West, same-sex attraction is often associated either with acts but not identities (Elliston 1995; Lancaster 1992; Wright 2008) or with identities different from those associated with the global gay rights movement (Gaudio 2009; Lorway 2008).

13. See Carter (2007).

14. Franklin Graham, "Family Talk" radio program, January 19, 2016. http://drjamesdobson.org/Broadcasts/Broadcast?i=a3d573e3-9c9c-498a-860b-9c0d6f08ef3a#.

15. She has written a memoir about her experiences, available at http://ambercantorna.com/.

16. Mary-Jean has since succeeded in helping to pass trans-rights legislation in Colorado that makes this kind of discriminatory employment practice no longer legal.

17. Lance, an ex-evangelical, ex-ex-gay pastor I met questioned the use of the Biblical passages on Sodom and Gomorrah as sources on sexual ethics. In the passage, the two towns are destroyed by God after two angels disguised as travelers are threatened with gang rape. Lot offers hospitality to the angels and is rescued by God before the destruction of Sodom, and as the angry mob gathers outside his doors asking for the visitors, Lot offers instead his virgin daughters for the mob to rape. "Is this really the best example of sexual values?" Lance asked. In my research, Sodom was the most commonly used passage justifying anti-LGBT stances.

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