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Queering the Virgin: Evangelical World-Making and the Heterosexual Crisis

Jennifer Miller

- ¹ In mainstream culture, purity balls are most often represented as a curiosity with awkward incestuous undertones and a decidedly anti-feminist view of female sexuality. For instance, responses to photographer David Magnusson's portraits of father and daughter purity ball participants nestled in intimate poses reminiscent of prom or wedding photographs have referred to the work as "a bizarre tradition" and "frankly terrifying" (Frank; Hawking). One feminist critic of purity balls suggests: "The romantic, and even sexual, implications of the event are also difficult to ignore. These events function to romanticize and make public the act of declaring chastity to one's father and to God" (Fahs 133). The popularity of purity balls has increased over the last decade despite being interpreted as sexually regressive and an affront to normal familial roles. As my project demonstrates purity culture in general, and virgin consciousness in particular, emerges at a historical juncture in which the US is experiencing a crisis in sexual norms brought about by increased LGBT visibility and dramatic shifts in the organization of heterosexual intimate and familial life. Purity culture offers what I will assess as a queer alternative to both a secular heterosexuality, which is read from within the movement as promiscuous, and increasingly normalized lesbian, gay, and bisexual intimate formations.

Through interpretative readings informed by queer theory, I analyze the queer affinities that permeate purity culture and virgin consciousness. I argue evangelical purity culture is an anti-normative world-making project anchored in a logic of sexual exceptionalism that defines evangelical purity against secular heterosexual promiscuity and various homosexual formations. Importantly, lesbian, gay, and bisexualities figure less prominently in purity culture than dangerous heterosexuality since it is a subpar heterosexual lifestyle that evangelicals are concerned will seduce them. Moreover, it is a sexual version of heterosexuality that they seek to replace.

Many queer theorists are quick to critique heteronormativity, a term popularized in the early 1990s by Michael Warner. The last decade has also seen an increase in critiques of homonormativity, a term that began to circulate following Lisa Duggan's now decade old book *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Warner, *Fear Of A Queer Planet*; Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*). I suggest that critiques of hetero- and homonormativity have become so commonplace since the recent incorporation of LGBT Americans into institutions like the military and marriage that they no longer provide much critical traction, in fact they may obscure more than they reveal. By queering the evangelical virgin, I hope to begin a conversation about the proliferation of heterosexualities; a conversation that accounts for heterosexual hierarchies produced through differently valued sexual practices, family formations, and modes of intimacy.

Evangelical purity culture troubles the idea that a monolithic heterosexuality exists, which challenges the very notion of homonormativity insofar as it takes for granted a set of heterosexual ideals, institutions, and practices that exist to be emulated, entered, or performed. This is important for thinking about the crisis in queerness, which is usually understood through the idea of homonormativity and tends to assume, although few would admit it, a queer telos that cannot be achieved without queer antipathy to heteronorms. Furthermore, queering the evangelical virgin challenges the frequent conflation of queerness and same-sex desire in order to consider the explanatory and exploratory possibilities of queerness when brought to bear on non-normative modalities of heterosexuality, even, or in this case, especially those such as the evangelical virgin that diagnose the increased visibility of LGBT people as part of the social illness heterosexual purity may cure.

Evangelical virginity, a formation that is a placeholder for an ideal version of godly heterosexuality, inserts difference into heterosexual universalism by distancing itself from worldly heterosexuality. For David Halperin, a founding figure in queer theory, homosexuality allows heterosexuality's internal contradictions to fade from view, since heterosexuality functions as the unmarked master term homosexuality is defined against (47). Evangelical virginity has inserted itself into the field of sexual visibility by constructing itself as at war, not with queer sexualities, but with the inadequacies of contemporary heterosexuality, which evangelicals read as immoral, promiscuous, adulterous, extramarital, and generally far too casual. The internal contradictions inherent in heterosexual formations are being foregrounded from within the dominant formation itself; a formation that was never self-same.

The only current scholarship that brings purity culture into conversation with queer theory is by communication scholar Jimmie Manning who recently published a series of articles based on a study of thirteen families involved in purity culture. Manning conducted extensive interviews in order to identify and analyze motives for participating in the purity movement. He draws several conclusions quite relevant to my project. First, he argues that purity culture "deconstruct[s] illusions of a monolithic heterosexuality" by offering an alternative to dominant heterosexuality (Manning 115). My interpretation of evangelical cultural texts is inline with Manning's reading of the ethnographic data he collected. We both find that secular, or mainstream, heterosexuality, as constructed by evangelical purity cultural participants is connected to a host of individual, familial, and social ills. In addition to foregrounding purity culture's work in challenging the notion of monolithic heterosexuality, Manning

suggests that insofar as purity culture renders heterosexuality an object of knowledge, it queers heterosexuality, which remains unmarked in a heteronormative social regime (Manning 115). If we read evangelical purity culture as a successful challenge to representations of heterosexuality as a cohesive whole, it is not just queerness that is in crisis, but heterosexuality, and with it the oppositional logic that renders anti-normativity coextensive with most queer theoretical projects.

1. Queering the Virgin

I introduce the term evangelical virgin consciousness to describe a mode of perceiving one's sexuality at the service of Christianity as both counter to and superior to secular heterosexuality, which evangelicals characterize as promiscuous and dangerous within the purity movement. The evangelical virgin does not pledge a lifetime of abstinence, but instead refrains from sexual activity prior to marriage. Evangelical virgin consciousness emerges in contemporary purity culture as an antinormative, subaltern subjectivity that challenges dominant modes of intimacy through everyday life practices, while inadvertently aligning itself with queer world making projects that emphasize creating new modes of intimacy and sociality through alternative sexualities. I will explore the evangelical purity culture as a world-making project in the second section of this paper. For now, I wish to identify and analyze evangelical virgin consciousness as constructed in purity culture and practiced by evangelicals.

Evangelical virginity is a particularly kind of virginity that prepares one for a specific type of (exceptional) heterosexuality. The evangelical virgin is a temporally drafted subject position that prepares one for a version of heterom matrimony sanctioned by God. For many evangelicals in the movement, purity until marriage will ensure relationship stability and sexual satisfaction. For example, in *Moral Revolution* evangelical abstinence educator Kris Vallotton writes: "Single people need to understand the difference between 'screwing' someone and the lifelong sexual adventures of pure lovers who have merged through marriage. These lovers have their spirits intertwined until they become one song, played on the instrument of eternal love and practices through episodes of timeless devotion" (Vallotton, Vallotton, and Johnson 124). Sex is not the enemy of evangelicals, in fact, sexual pleasure is often described as an important benefit of abstinence until marriage, pleasure is a reward for waiting, just as sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, and divorce are often articulated as punishments for sexual promiscuity.

The timing of evangelical virginity's intelligibility in US political and cultural spheres is not coincidental; the evangelical critique of normative heterosexuality parallels the increased visibility of queer genders and sexualities in the same period exposing the contours of a culture war anchored in sexuality that has impacted the normative core of US sexuality— a core that continues to shift under the weight of evangelicals and queers.

- 10 Even as evangelical virgins seek to demonize queers, they find themselves in a queer position vis-à-vis versions of the heterosexual normalcy that they define themselves against. The evangelical virgin's willed contrast from normative heterosexual promiscuity reveals the generative quality of normalcy by exploring heterosexuality as a plural mode of desiring, enacting, and embodying opposite sex desire. It is through

refusals of the norm that the new virgin emerges not simply as a “sexual status” but as a sexual identity, more specifically, what one scholar refers to as a “subaltern” sexual identity (Moslener 12). In the context of evangelical purity culture virginity is embodied and expressed as both a religious and a political identity that justifies its intelligibility and inclusion on a field of sexual identities rendered public. The subalternity of virgins, like that of queers, marks a point of convergence between these otherwise quite different groups. Both understand themselves as anti-normative and both seek to challenge what are read as normative modes of sociality. Moreover, the evangelical virgin’s politicization of sexuality justifies their public displays of virginity; they “out” themselves to demonstrate the presence of virginity and demand to be read as consciously countering a culture that proposes casual sex as the norm. Pure sex is for the purpose of reproduction and only occurs within the institution of marriage.

Evangelical groups celebrate their outsider status by representing themselves as victims of a secular culture that seeks to make living as a Christian in American society next to impossible. As a result, an evangelical victimology develops in which evangelicals are framed as vulnerable within a secular culture that devalues biblical ideals and makes it next to impossible for Christians to embody and enact their Christianity. Increasingly, mainstream organizations including Silver Ring Thing, True Love Waits, and Moral Revolution construct abstinence until marriage as a new sexual revolution, a revolution that counters the promiscuity of secular heterosexuality and the social ills attributed to it. These particular groups address young people by appealing to the budding sense of autonomy and provide a narrative of rebellion that positions evangelical virgins as subalterns under attack by an oversexualized secular culture.

The Silver Ring Thing (SRT), founded in 1995 by Denny and Amy Pattyn, promotes abstinence only education through community events, which are approximately two hours in length and include music, videos, comedy skits, and special effects. The “silver ring” referenced in the organization’s name is a promise ring that symbolizes a commitment to sexual purity and abstinence until marriage (“Silver Ring Thing | Home”). Currently, the group’s goal is to partner with 75–85 communities during the 2015–2016 fiscal year to secure tour dates for their Uprising Tour —“Disrupting Common Culture” (“Silver Ring Thing | Home”). The group identifies “common culture” as a world of casual sex with unwanted consequences that teens are asked to revolt against. The tour’s main promotional video features three teenagers, two young men and a young woman. One young man is working at a coffee bar, another is lifting weights at a gym, and the third, a young woman is developing film in a darkroom. The teenagers are not shown together or with other people emphasizing their isolation as teenagers who refuse to accept the normalization of sexual promiscuity. It is in their isolated environments that each teenager encounters examples of “an oversexualized culture.” The disgust they feel as individuals is tapped into for the purpose of organizing pure youth to revolt against “common culture.”

In the video, coffee making equipment and ingredients surround the young barista as he listens to a program about teen pregnancy. He reacts with visible signs of disgust. In another segment, the young bodybuilder shakes his head when confronted with statistics about the profitability of the pornography industry. A close-up of each teen accompanies the word “outcasts,” “misfits,” and “freaks”—names they will be called if they rebel against the “common culture.” After briefly profiling the teenagers

separately, all three appear to receive a text message as a voiceover incites “this is our culture and we’re taking it back.” The voiceover conjures a community that they each may partake in: “We are the uprising. We are the revolution.” They all nod at their cell phones and abandon their present tasks presumably to join the revolution. The video, which promotes the newest wave of Silver Ring Things tour schedule, defines common culture as oversexed and offers abstinence until marriage as a challenge to promiscuity, while characterizing abstinence as the choice of teenagers hip to the commodification and ubiquity of sexuality that positions their promiscuous peers as passive dupes absorbing without engaging the world around them.

The recruitment strategy of Silver Ring Thing foregrounds the anti-normativity of evangelical purity, particularly abstinence, and provides teenagers with both a sense of identity and community. It is in the context of evangelical purity culture that evangelical purity consciousness emerges as a rejection of a version of heterosexuality connected to profit, pornography, and unwanted pregnancy. The heterohierarchy introduced by organizations like Silver Ring Thing that categorize sex outside of marriage as a social problem consider purity culture a corrective to the problems plaguing contemporary US society, which is defined as “oversexualized” within the movement. I see an accidental affinity to queerness emerging in the fixation with anti-normativity, particularly the sexual self-consciousness anchored in exceptionalism and unarticulated telos tethered to the making of a new and better world ushered to life by sex practices and intimate formations that differ from a rather ill-defined heterosexual normativity.

2. Evangelical World Making

Although purity culture, including purity balls, promise rings, and virginity pledges, has become increasingly mainstream since the 1990s, it does not represent a major shift in evangelical world making. Instead, it extends a popular evangelical strategy in which purity is instrumentalized to maintain relevance and power in a changing cultural landscape (Moslener). At several critical junctures in US history Christian evangelicals have inserted their beliefs about gender, sexuality, and the family into national discourse by linking personal morality, particularly sexual morality, with national vitality (Friedman; Gusfield; Mintz; Moslener). Contemporary evangelical purity culture is the newest articulation of the project, but it is not novel. However, although sexual morality has often been a target of evangelical proselytizing it is now tasked with changing the world and evangelicals are no longer satisfied to note who is doing it wrong, they are now offering a plethora of advice about how to do it right.

Quiverfull stands at the extreme end of evangelical world making. Participants in the Quiverfull movement see the most enduring binary structuring national life as the difference opposition between Christian and secular cultures. Quiverfull began to gain popularity in the 1990s. The movement supports a “submissive lifestyle” that blended the nineteenth century cult of domesticity with the bible, while emphasizing the important role Christian women play in curing “a sinful nation” (Phillips 12–14). Of course, the temporal emergence of Quiverfull overlaps with increased queer visibilities, the agenda setting authority of the religious right in US politics, and the entrance of LGBT civil rights into the public sphere through discussions of participation in the

military and institution of marriage. At this historical juncture gender and sexual norms were changing, a continuation of feminist and gay activism of the 1960s and 1970s, that has influenced sexual expectations, practices, and possibilities.

Looking at contemporary American culture through the lens of the Quiverfull movement reveals a small world of adherents to the bible and their others—a long list that includes gays, lesbians, bisexuals, divorcees, unmarried couple, single parents, casual daters, and a variety of other formations, identifications, and types of intimacy. In her study of Quiverfull, Kathryn Joyce quotes a member of the Quiverfull movement stating: “The Further the nation gets away from God, the starker the Christian contrast grows. The darker the world gets, the more we stand out” (138). This revealing quote from a member of the Quiverfull community reads Christians as a minority population that have become hypervisible because of their moral difference from the secular norm. As such, Quiverfull is defined through the disavowal of dominant secular heterosexuality and, to a lesser extent, queer sexuality. However, it is secular heterosexuality that is perceived as a threat to the individual, since it is heterosexual promiscuity that is what one must reject for one’s self.

The Quiverfull critique of sexual norms often intersects with an attack on feminism which is blamed for divorce, casual sex, and male wage cuts through the elimination of the “family wage” (Joyce 11). Defining itself against secular gender and sexual normativity, the Quiverfull movement seeks a return to biblical gender roles and the cellular family, self-contained and independent of state interference; needless to say the cellular family is heterosexual and committed to reproduction (Joyce 29). The Quiverfull rejection of state interference reflects the demonization of family’s that rely on state aid, a deep suspicion of the government as a secular opponent of Christianity, and a refusal of gender equality that is justified through the idea of complementarity. In the Quiverfull movement women and men are seen as having separate but equally important rolls in the family and church. Women are expected to submit to male authority and focus their attention on children and the home. These ideals resurface in more mainstream evangelical formations, including purity balls.

Quiverfull performatively constitutes its founding ideals as achievable through its life practices. In other words, by practicing their belief system Quiverfull participants are engaging in an inadvertently queer world making project that emphasizes sex and gender roles as intrinsic to the moral fate of the nation. Importantly, sexual practices and intimate formations are seen as transformative and gender and sexual roles are bound to the future of the nation. In order to remake the nation in the image of biblical ideals participants in the movement are proponents of homeschooling, which makes the family the primary locus of socialization as opposed to the secular public school system. Home schooling materials often depict clearly defined gender roles that produce girls and boys as inhabiting opposite roles that complete one another. Additionally, Quiverfull seeks to replace casual dating, even Christian dating, with courtship, a process with the intention of ending with Christian marriage that is closely monitored by the couple’s parents (Joyce 134). Even more, sex exists for the purpose of reproducing in the Quiverfull movement and children are seen as soldiers in a culture war that the most extreme evangelicals imagine winning demographically (Joyce 137). For example, Geoffrey Botkin, founder of Western Conservatory, a ministry that believes Christian families are the foundation of civilization while blaming weak, e.g. non-Christian, families for destabilizing

civilization, has introduced a “two-hundred-year plan for multigenerational faithfulness,” a family plan based on projected births of male-children in one’s bloodline and all that will be accomplished by the future line (Joyce 229). Quiverfull links sexuality and world making by envisioning reproduction as a long-term strategy to influence US culture and politics for generations.

Although Quiverfull only boasts a few thousand adherents it serves as an inspirational model for more mainstream evangelicals that provides conservatives with “a counter-example when they condemn modern society” (Joyce 171). Its aspirational influence on mainstream purity culture including purity balls, abstinence only pledges, and promise rings, offers a model for imagining gender complementarity, hetero-reproductive sexuality, and the autonomous family unit that many less zealous participants in purity culture pay lip service to even if they do not fully embrace in their life practices.

2.1 Purity Balls

One of the queerest aspects of evangelical purity culture, from the most committed participant in Quiverfull to the far less engaged teenage girl wearing a promise ring she purchased after attending a Silver Ring Thing spectacle, is the focus on the transformative aspects of sexuality and the rejection of normative sexual values and practices. This mirrors the focus on sexuality as personally and socially transformative found in the work of queer theorists like Tim Dean, Leo Bersani, and Jack Halberstram, theorists who write about the sexual identifications, communities, and practices that emerge in queer cultural contexts (Dean; Bersani; Halberstam). Much as queer theorists have foregrounded sexuality as a critical site of community building and struggled to theorize and practice intimate formations that challenge the assumed normativity of heterosexual marital life, evangelicals in the purity movement position themselves as rebels refusing heteronorms. In this section I consider the role of purity balls, a popular evangelical spectacle that foreground the importance of familial relationships and participate in a world making project that seeks to transform family roles, gender ideals, and dating practices, by making abstinence a way of life.

Emerging in the late-1990s, purity balls are a demonstration of purity through which young evangelical girls affirm their virginity and pledge to abstain from sex until their wedding day. The first purity ball, founded by husband and wife team Randy and Lisa Wilson, was held in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a haven for evangelical Christians, in 1998 (Joyce 225). Within ten years of the first purity ball over 4500 balls were organized in 48 states demonstrating the increased popularity and normalization of purity culture within evangelical circles as well as the increased visibility of evangelical virgins in dominant culture as expressed by featuring purity balls on a variety of programs including Dr. Phil and the Tyra Banks Show (Phillips 1).

Evangelical purity culture and evangelical virginity has been the subject of numerous journal articles and a few documentaries demonstrating the emerging place virginity has in our sexual imaginary. *The Virgin Daughters*, directed by Jane Treays, explores purity balls and their participants through interviews and videos of a purity ball. The documentary is critical of the gendered double standards evident in purity ball culture as well as the pressures abstinence puts on young women who have sex prior to marriage. *Virgin Tales*, directed by Mirjam von Arx, follows the Wilson family,

founders of the first purity ball, for two years as they prepare to host their last ball. The Wilson's are the first family of purity; more than a family, they are a lifestyle brand. Their website features an EP by married daughter Khrystian Lewis featuring songs about her love for her husband. Also married, Jordyn Peppin facilitated Christ-inspired etiquette lessons for teenage girls. Additionally, son Logan runs three day workshops referred to as School of Honor which teaches young men to "glorify God through manhood" ("School of Honor"). The Wilson family's secondary projects are an extension of purity balls and serve to teach proper gender roles. In fact, the Wilsons see their work as influencing family relationships as well as the sexual and emotional lives of girls. For them, purity balls help girls rehearse the kind of relationship they should desire to have with a husband while solidifying the existing bond between father and daughter. In Jane Treays' 2008 documentary, *The Virgin Daughters*, Lisa Wilson discusses why she and her husband organized the first purity ball: "We wanted to create an event that was so spectacular to the heart of a daughter with her father that that would be a turning point. Maybe for their relationship. Maybe even for future generations." This template prepares daughters for their submissive roles within an idyllic heterosexual marriage anchored in reproduction. Fathers are romantic placeholders that direct daughters' affection into what is considered an appropriate intimate relationship that mitigates their desire for male contact that could lead to sex outside of marriage.

In the same documentary Randy Wilson suggests that a core feature of femininity is requiring validation of physical beauty, which he links to feelings of self worth. According to Wilson, fathers must affirm their daughters' physical desirability and failing to do so may cause them to turn to other men for love and affection. In this dynamic, fathers see their daughters as sexual objects and assure their daughters of their sexual desirability. Not only does this naturalize the passivity and objectification of young women in these patriarchal relationships, a point made by many scholars and journalists in their discussions of purity balls, it positions daughters as objects of desire for the father.

Fear of contaminating the mind and body is a ubiquitous warrant for purity culture that expresses the belief that sex is dirty unless it is sanctioned by God within the confines of heterosexual marriage for the purpose of reproduction (Manning 106). In *The Virgin Daughters*, another documentary that explores purity culture this one through the point of view of participants, Randy and Lisa Wilson's daughter, Khrystian, unmarried at the time of filming, explains why she wants to remain a virgin until marriage: "I wouldn't want to bring anything unhealthy into my body." Khrystian, like other evangelical virgins and fathers who participate in the movement, demonstrates a fear of contamination, which the obsession with purity seeks to mitigate. This sentiment is echoed in high school counselor and father of three Kevin Monroe's, who, describes why he attends the Wilson's purity balls with his children: "I'm not interested in someone messing their minds up for the rest of their lives. I'm not interested in them getting cancer of the cervix. I'm not interested in them getting venereal disease. I'm not interested in them meeting the wrong person and suffering and going through a divorce. I understand pain" (Treays).

For Monroe, abstaining from sex until marriage will protect his daughters from the physical and emotional dangers of sex. Purity culture participants see sex outside of marriage and for purposes other than reproduction radically differently than marital sex for the purpose of reproduction. The line they draw between good and bad sex,

moral and immoral sexual choices, is anchored in the notion that the version of sex they celebrate is exceptional; unlike other forms of sex it is not connected to disease, heartbreak, and unwanted children. The heterohierarchy produced through categorizations of types of heterosexuality shatter the notion of a cohesive heterosexuality that homosexuality may be defined against. The distinction drawn between types of acceptable and unacceptable heterosexuality offers new ways to frame and interpret the hierarchization of sexualities and sex acts. Concerns with contamination and the rhetoric of contagion have frequently been used to stigmatize gay men; mobilizing a discourse of contagion to attack secular heterosexuality parallels discourse about AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s (Long). Critiquing normative heterosexuality through a rhetoric of disease queers it, further collapsing a strong opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality by rendering some heterosexuals, like all homosexuals, unfit for the life of the nation, a social problem to be cured.

Not all parents in the movement remained pure until marriage and in many instances their regrets inspire their participation in purity culture. For instance, in interviews conducted by Jane Treays and documented in *The Virgin Daughter's* eleven-year-old Hannah Lane's mother confided her past relationship calamities, which include a failed engagement, to her daughter. In addition, one father, David Diefenderfer, also interviewed by Treays for her documentary, describes being thirteen when he first had sex. He sees this as the cause of his inability to maintain a committed relationship and has nine children with seven women (Treays). Diefenderfer escorted his two youngest daughters to the Wilson's 2008 Colorado Springs purity ball hoping that his daughters' involvement in purity culture might keep them from making the mistakes he did. In both instances the parents of daughters involved in purity balls hope to manage their children's emotional life by protecting them from sexual experiences. Even as the fathers who participate in purity ball culture are proxies for future husbands, the daughters, at least in some instances, are burdened to redeem their parents lost innocence, it is as if they can erase their parents' bad relationships, traumatic sexual experiences, and lost loves, bringing them closer to purity.

Secular culture, like worldly sex, is represented as the enemy; the world and the worldly are dangerous and will entice young girls and women into a life of promiscuity (Moslener 84). It is this world that purity culture, including purity balls, counters. Although Purity ball participants do not appeal to antinormativity as do organizations like True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing that tend to approach teenagers outside of the family, the language of rescue and heroic defiance of mainstream values permeates purity ball culture. This language is particularly appealing to men who play an important role as fathers swooping in to defend their daughters from scrupulous boys and secular culture. For instance, in one interview Randy Wilson suggests that mainstream culture is waiting to lure young girls into "the murky waters of exploitation. They need to be rescued by you, their dad" (Banerjee). In the same article one of Wilson's daughters is quoted describing the cultural norm of promiscuity: "The culture says you're free to sleep with as many people as you want to. ... What does that get you but complete chaos?" (Banerjee). The language used by purity ball leaders to describe secular culture echoes that used by groups like Silver Ring Thing and True Love Waits. However, the rhetoric that surrounds purity participants is quite different. Silver Ring Thing positions teenagers as rebels refusing to be duped into casual sex by mainstream culture. On the other hand, the language of purity balls

positions young girls as vulnerable to the mainstream culture and in need of protection from father-heroes willing to go to battle for their hearts and hymen.

Evangelical purity culture is an example of an effective world making project that does not only work to construct a vision of an ideal world; it creates a vision of current sexual norms in which an abstract culture seduces children bringing with it cancer and chaos. Evangelicals create a crisis that only a godly relationship to sexuality can conquer. After constructing a crisis in sexuality they construct a return to biblical gender and sexual norms as the revolutionary response needed to deliver the nation from its current state of degeneracy.

2.2 Abstinence Education

The message of revolution through sexual purity is reiterated by the pro-abstinence organization Moral Revolution. Moral Revolution, founded by husband and wife team Kris and Kathy Vallotton, is similar to Silver Ring Thing insofar as it promotes abstinence until marriage. However, instead of transmitting their message largely through events this group focuses on educational materials. Moral Revolution's visions statement:

We envision a society that celebrates true femininity and masculinity, lives from virtues and protects the pre-born. We dream of a world where there is no sexually transmitted disease, and where poverty and single-parent homes are a thing of the past. We imagine a planet where child abuse, pornography, prostitution and sex slavery are archaic, urban legends... a culture where every orphan is placed in a healthy home, and a world where righteous men and women lead every realm of society. This is the only kind of revolution that will restore the human race back to its God-given identity, dignity and purpose.

- 31 Moral Revolution's ardently anti-choice wish to protect the pre-born seeks to recouple sex with procreation even as their hope for the eradication of poverty, which they associate with single-parent homes, seeks to situate sex and reproduction within the sphere of marriage. Finally, the eradication of sexually transmitted diseases, which I have already shown is a concern for the purity movement is inserted into the world making project of the Vallottons. According to the Vallottons, and this is true of purity culture participants generally, in order for the human race to get back on a godly path it is primarily our relationship to sexuality that must change. It is as if by practicing biblical gender and sexual roles human sociality will change eradicating the pain and suffering that emanates from oppression and exploitation.

3. The Normativity Crisis: Homonormativity without Heteronormativity

Writing in the mid-1990s, David Halperin argued that heterosexuality needs homosexuality "to enable it to acquire by default its status as a default, as a *lack of difference* or an *absence of abnormality*" (44). For Halperin, homosexuality allows heterosexuality's internal contradictions to fade from view, since heterosexuality functions as the unmarked master term homosexuality is defined against (47). Now that evangelical virginity has inserted itself into the field of sexual visibility by constructing itself as at war, not with queer sexualities, but with the inadequacies of contemporary

heterosexuality, the internal contradictions inherent in heterosexual formations are being foregrounded from within the dominant formation itself; a formation that was never self-same.

Much queer scholarship reifies heteronormativity without paying enough attention to the realities of heterosexual lives. In failing to look closely at the existence of multiple heterosexualities we fail to produce intersectional analyses of the “other heterosexuals” the ones the nation does not claim including teenage parents, single-parent households, singles, or non-reproductive couples. In fact, the term homonormativity is used to describe the elimination of risky queerness through incorporation and neutralization into national rights-granting and duty-bearing institutions, which demonstrates a suspicion about the effects of the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, the legalization of marriage equality, and the commodification of gay subcultures (Puar; Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*; Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*; Schroeder). But, what if queerness, instead of remaining affixed, to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, is transforming structures of desire and intimate formations more broadly? I hope to have demonstrated that virgin consciousness appropriates the antinormative impulse of queerness even as it seeks to reject what would most likely be defined as queer in our current discursive regime.

Queer scholars and activists are often quick to critique the lesbian and gay clamoring for marriage equality as assimilatory—homonormative. The issues many queer theorists have with marriage equality pivot around the assimilationist impulse at the core of a politics of inclusion that requires an “other” to solidify the center (Queen; Bailey, Kandaswamy, and Richardson; Puar; Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*). In addition to criticizing assimilatory maneuvers by members of the LGBT community some queer theorists contend that marriage equality represents compulsory heteronormativity and an end to critical queer resistance to oppressive state institutions as well as the erasure of alternative queer cultures. The queer exceptionalism that haunts critiques of homonormativity wallow in the lost potential of queerness itself as a world making project that refuses the confines of normative ideals, practices, and institutions. However, I see this queer exceptionalism, for better or worse, appropriated by the queer haters, who are, perhaps, the queer makers. After all, if queerness is under attack in America today it is not by the religious right who would deny newly married same-sex couples cake, but the progressive heterosexuals shoving wedding cake down their throats.

Even as queer scholars bemoan the loss of queerness in the age of flexible, yet contingent, acceptance, evangelical Christian discourse about sexuality postulates that heteroreproductive monogamy, the stuff of heteronormativity, is in fact no longer the norm (Rogers; “Silver Ring Thing | Home”; “True Love Waits—LifeWay”). This is a critical observation frequently overlooked by the most critical theorists of sexuality. After the 1970s, the uncoupling of sex from reproduction, through more accessible birth control, and the rise in divorce and cohabitation, challenged the moral exceptionalism at the center of existing heterosexual and homosexual distinctions.

Heterofailures are also increasingly difficult to hide in a tabloid culture focused on the sexual lives of political leaders, religious authorities, and random celebrities. In *The History of Heterosexuality* Jonathon Ned Katz discusses the publicness of 1990s heterosexual (moral) failures including President Bill Clinton’s extramarital blowjob and Joey Buttafuoco’s extramarital affair with a teenager. More recently rape

accusations directed at Bill Cosby and molestation charges directed at a Duggan show heterosexuality's failures. These examples highlight heterosexual excess. It is excessive because it goes beyond reproductive work attributed to heterosexuality and it is destructive insofar as it threatens real heterosexual marriages as well as the idea of heterosexual marriage. For Katz, the spectacle of hetero-failures dissolves the moral difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality (184).

I have identified the evangelical virgin as a sexual subject position that embraces anti-normativity even as it claims sexual exceptionalism and invests in a world making project that seeks to re-center evangelical religious morality, traditional marriage, and biblical gender roles as foundational to the US nation-building project. It is my contention that the evangelical virgin problematizes the universality of a monolithic figuration of heterosexuality by introducing a form of heterosexual exceptionalism that is defined, in evangelical discourse, as superior to normative figurations of heterosexuality. The sexual laxity associated with normative heterosexuality is considered in the same negative light as queer sexualities, an out-of-control heterosexuality is associated with abortion and divorce, both of which are considered detrimental to the nation. Even more, evangelical virginity discourse reveals an accidental affinity to queerness through an appropriation of its antinormative positionality insofar as virginity is defined against, and garners its oppositional traction as a result of its distance from an assumed heterosexual norm.

Perhaps it no longer makes sense to theorize sexual normativity through a model reminiscent of Gayle Rubin's "charmed circle," which describes "good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality" as heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, free, coupled, committed, private, and vanilla, among other things (152). Instead of thinking about sexual hierarchies through the spatial metaphor of a normative core it may be more productive to visualize a constellation of sexualities in which positions are demarcated fluidly and defined against one another; the map itself is continually changing. My study of evangelical purity culture reveals that definitions of normativity, both heteronormativity and homonormativity, are quite dependent on the position of the person or group defining it at any given point in time. Binary logics of good/bad, wordly/Christian, or queer/normative are articulated from places on the map. Reading the map depends on the place one interprets from; construction of normativity shifts across place and time within a fluid constellation of intelligible and emerging sexualities.

My essay has sought to complicate the very idea of a single heteronorm stabilized by a monolithic homosexuality or even a spectrum of queerness. In order to map out the present conditions of sexual intelligibility and the cultural work sexual categorization serves, my essay takes a broad view of the US sexual landscape, bringing the evangelical virgin into focus, which expands our sexual imaginary. The evangelical virgin is queerly queering the very notion of heteronormativity; in other words, the evangelical virgin makes heterosexuality a stranger to itself by revealing its inconsistencies, inadequacies, and experiential failures.

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ABSTRACTS

This interpretive essay reads US evangelical purity culture through queer theory demonstrating that the evangelical investment in virginity now produces the evangelical virgin as a politicized subaltern subject position. Aspects of purity culture including purity balls are theorized as undertaking an unexpectedly queer world making project.

INDEX

Keywords: evangelical, heterosexuality, queer, virginity, world making

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