Rhetorics of Impurities: ExVangelicalism as Excavating and Encountering Purity

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RHETORICS OF IMPURITIES: EXVANGELICALISM AS EXCAVATING AND ENCOUNTERING PURITY

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Communication Studies

The University of Memphis
May 2024
Dedication

To my brothers, Jordan and Jacob, from whom, I’ve learned honesty, hard work, and how to ask questions.

I also learned how to dodge your water balloons and toy airsoft gun pellets.
Acknowledgements

Joel Carpenter (1997) posits that researching and writing about religious movements “has its occupational hazards” (p. x). This statement has elements of truth. Doing religious communication research has found me in spaces of frustration, confusion, and vexation. I have often questioned why I do religious communication research—particularly research focusing on rhetorics of purity, evangelicalism, sexuality, and gender. But I keep returning to those who remind me why I do this work in their own ways and without them, I would not be where I am today.

The first person to acknowledge would be my advisor, Dr. Christi Moss. There is so much I could say. But my stubborn Midwestern attitude seems to keep me confined. What I will say is that I never would have imagined working with a doctoral advisor, committee chair, and professor so inclined towards their advisees’ wellbeing. You cared for my work, my teaching, and my health. Thank you for answering all my emails, texts, phone calls, and office door knocks.

I have such gratitude for my committee members. Dr. Katherine Hendrix, the push you give your students was adamant in your role with this dissertation. Your feedback, questions, and intrigue with this work strengthened my approach since day one. I could sense this even the first day we met before I was a student at the University of Memphis. Dr. Gray Matthews, your handprint is all over my work. From being my very first confidant to a committee member with your office door open, the feedback you provide has always been insightful and thought-provoking. Dr. Sarah Potter, your support from behind the scenes and knowledge of all things American Protestant history was incredibly helpful to this dissertation and other research projects.
Drs. de Velasco, Stephens, and Johnson, thank you for the years of showing interest, providing feedback, and being friendly faces in the halls of ACB, NCA, and even CSCA. Thank you for being the last set of professors I would be taught by as a student. I wouldn’t want to end my career as a graduate student with anyone other than you, my committee members, and other faculty at the University of Memphis. Lori Stallings, thank you for reminding me that my dissertation was always “hatching.” Thank you to Catherine Eakin, my grad colleague-turned-Memphis friend. You were quite literally my sounding board, and I can’t thank you enough. Thanks for the initial invite to “grab coffee” at City and State.

The list of people supporting me in this “hazardous” work continues outside of Memphis. Dr. Pat Loebs, as my advisor-turned-mentor-turned-co-author, you have been instrumental in my journey to this dissertation since before I graduated undergrad. I owe you a drink. As the friends who told me of purity first and listen intently as I talk about purity now, Joelle, Lydia, and Kelsey, you kept me going. To my Indiana and Ohio family, thank you for dealing with years of my schedule and stress. Thank you for all the care packages, visits, and texts. I love each of your dearly.

And finally, thank you to my spouse, Owen. Who knew being married to a horticulturist would be instrumental in helping me unpack the rhetorics of place and space with analogies of gardening? I didn’t, but I’m glad you’ve been and will continue to be by my side through all these occupational hazards.
Abstract

This dissertation explores purity discourse through the lens of the ExVangelical movement. Using mixed methods, this inquiry employs critical qualitative research to examine how ExVangelicalism uses the roles of identification, place, and space to critique purity’s oppressive categorizations. In doing so, ExVangelicals represent a theoretical rhetoric of impurities in which purity is continuously excavated and encountered.

Based on a queer feminist reading of ExVangelical texts, this dissertation presents three frameworks in which to reorient ExVangelicalism as a post-purity movement. First, through ExVangelicalism, purity is examined through rhetorics of identification, place, and space. Second, as a post-purity movement, ExVangelicals partake in rhetorical excavating and encountering of purity. Third, this excavation and encountering of purity theoretically positions ExVangelicals as embracing a rhetoric of impurities. Through a critical analysis of qualitative interviews, published memoirs, and participant diaries, this research contends that a rhetoric of impurities is a needed response in repositioning the centricity of purity in everyday spaces.

By exploring ExVangelical texts from a critical mixed-methods lens, this research recognizes both public and private conceptualizations of purity as space that situates the body as bordered place charting purity/impurities. The final chapter presents ExVangelical’s rhetoric of impurities as a theoretical process needing to examine sites of purity. These include healthism, heteronormativity, white feminism, and the college classroom. As ExVangelicalism strives for impure religiosity that allows the body to be embodied and exist as rhetorical space, this dissertation presents purity discourse—beyond religious doctrines—as needing to be excavated and encountered in effort to construct impure and embodied spaces. In doing so, purity is recognized as a system of colonial classification using the feminine body as bordered place.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As I click “play” on the very first episode, Blake Chastain’s somewhat muffled voice begins to introduce his “Exvangelical” podcast. The podcast opens with Chastain explaining what he wants from a podcast centered on the ExVangelical experience.\(^1\) Whether catering to people who have left evangelicalism to explore other layers of a Christian faith, have left Christianity altogether, or have chosen to stay within evangelical spaces despite their issues, Chastain argues he wants to hear from “people who have grown up in evangelicalism in some way (Chastain, 2016, 1:00)” but have decided to critique their former doctrines as they begin to process “their understandings of themselves, of the world, of God, of the person of Jesus, or of anyone (1:07).” While it seems to be recorded on a budget with easily accessible equipment, Chastain’s purpose is heard loud and clear. Whether discussing gender roles, sexuality, or politics overall, “evangelicalism has a problem with how it deals with dissenting opinions in its ranks (0:32),” and that is “exactly” what Chastain wants to focus on (0:37). As thought leader in the ExVangelical movement, Chastain’s podcast remains a well-known source of ExVangelical information and at the time of this dissertation being written, has produced over 200 episodes, one per month.

With the abundant rise of evangelical Trumpism (Harris & Steiner, 2018; Margolis, 2020; Wehner, 2021) and scandals housed in well-known evangelical spaces (Kellner, 2021), there is bound to be pushback on the pride by which the term “evangelical” is used (Djupe et al., 2017; Hesse, 2017). However, the purposeful and domineering “x” within the “ExVangelical” term

\(^1\) In this dissertation, I punctuate “ExVangelical” with the “E” and “V” capitalized and the “x” lowercase to signify the two distinctions of an ExVangelical’s identity. ExVangelicals are formally tied to evangelicalism (“Ex”) yet continue to experience the lasting impact of evangelical teachings (“[e]Vangelical”) (Fekete & Knippel, 2020; Gushee, 2020).
does not merely signify a former evangelical simply “leaving the church” (Brobst, 2021), but the label gives credence to individuals purposefully monstrafying their previous evangelical religiosity by countering it with a new label and an ongoing unpacking of previously held doctrinal beliefs. An ExVangelical is not someone merely stepping away from evangelicalism, but someone who is going through a messy divorce of ideology and asking questions about race, gender, sexuality, disability, and nationalism (Panchuk, 2022).

Within the context of American evangelicalism, doctrine revolving around race, gender, sexuality, disability, and nationalism are locatable in the religious doctrine’s usage of purity. As an ideology (Douglas, 1966; Foucault, 1990; Shotwell, 2016), culturally based movements (Houser, 2021; Schultz, 2021), and part of a historical American evangelical discourse (Moslener, 2015), purity regulates the relationship with and around such contexts. Evangelical purity creates boundaries between what is seen as safe and unsafe for the strengthening of one’s faith and the overall growth of evangelical Christianity as a national faith (Sutton, 2014; Worthen, 2014). In doing so, instead of chaos, evangelical purity abides by order. Instead of nuance, evangelical purity is situated in a binary of purity/impurity. Instead of doubt, evangelical purity remains trusting of evangelical authority and hierarchies of knowledge.

While the discursive concept of purity rhetorics and American evangelicalism has been a historic relationship deriving categories from each other, the ExVangelical movement has only recently become a notable counter to this relationship. Within less than a decade, the term “ExVangelical” has come to signify a post-evangelical wrestling with intimate experiences within American evangelicalism’s purity discourse. On his website (Chastain, n.d.), Chastain takes ownership of “coining” the term. He argues that since his first #exvangelical tweet, the
ExVangelical movement has taken shape and has produced conversations within social media. Chastain explains the purpose of the label by writing:

"Exvangelical" functions as both a way to find others who have left white evangelical beliefs and communities behind, as well as a helpful frame for criticizing white evangelical institutions and practices. It is not a wholesale replacement of evangelicalism, but a shared starting point—it acknowledges that we are rooted in similar experiences, and celebrates the new and diverse ways people find to flourish (Chastain, n.d., para. 3).

Since then, the term has proliferated in mediated discourse focusing on the post-Christian experience of deconstruction (Onishi, 2019; Rohadi, 2022; Stroop, 2017). Interpreting contexts where such a term is heavily employed has remained largely within mediated spaces (Fekete & Knippel, 2020; Mannon, 2019; Campbell, 2021).

While Chastain is known as the creator of the term ExVangelical, its usage has come to signify a specific transitional identity. Alongside Chastain (2019), Stroop (2017)—another ExVangelical thought leader in mediated contexts—defines its purpose in three constructive ways. First, the addition of “X” within the term “evangelical” signifies a break-up or divorce from evangelicalism. It displays two distinct rhetorical acts: a clear rejection of white institutional evangelicalism and an acknowledgment of personal autonomy. An ExVangelical is not only a protestant Christian experiencing a deconstruction/reconstruction of faith, but they explicitly wrestle with evangelical codes and cultural constructs of race, gender, and sexuality. Second, by locating and using the term ExVangelical, other post-evangelicals can locate one another and experience identification. Third, and most unique to its liminal trait, ExVangelical is a nuanced term. It is hardly monolithic and invites deconstructing and post-evangelical
Christians to step away from the homogenously shaped American evangelical Church and work through deconstruction/reconstruction in any facet desired by the individual. In doing so, ExVangelicals—unlike their former evangelical selves—do not formulate this identity with a cultural expectancy and can sift through it with their convictions as a guide.

However, to understand and begin to interrogate the experiences of an ExVangelical, one cannot separate evangelicalism from its usage of American political rhetoric and purity discourse. Houser (2021) urges scholars to remember that sexual purity exists as an ideology larger than issues of sexual abstinence. Purity is tied intimately to moral and political issues of the American demographic. Beyond anti-abortion narratives, homosexuality panics, and anti-sex education prerogatives (Irvine, 2002), purity discourse also stipulates the protection of white women’s sexualities (DeRogatis, 2015) and requires subscribers to disembody themselves from embodied realities (Moslener, 2022; Moultrie, 2017) among other multilayered issues. Therefore, purity is a discursive term that encapsulates more than sexual purity or health purity, but when tied to American evangelicalism, becomes more involved.

Therefore, to extract oneself from purity boundaries, one endeavors to question and reformulate layers of previous doctrinal beliefs. This is imaginatively messy, involved, and laborious. I argue that ExVangelicals, with their counter-religious identity, are attempting to do such. Through the ExVangelical movement, ExVangelicals use their divisive label—both personally and collectively—to partake in openly questioning the purity rhetorics woven throughout the landscape of American evangelical Christianity and conceptualizing new possibilities for the embracing of what has been historically deemed “impure.” From a rhetorical perspective, this act allows ExVangelicals—with their post-evangelical² religiosity—to use their

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² The term “post-evangelical” found footing when Dave Tomlinson published *The Post Evangelical* in 1994 (Fekete & Knippel, 2020).
identity to excavate and encounter concepts of purity to create what I deem as rhetorics of impurities. For ExVangelicals to work towards a rhetoric of impurities, their excavation (recognizing) and encountering (reconstructing) of purity becomes centerfold to their identity communication. By pausing and examining the possibilities involved with such post-purity identification discourse, I address two crucial issues.

First, to examine identity rhetorics, I understand that the power of a label is twofold. Power discursively manifests with the choice of an identity label and with the label itself (Gardner, 2017). When asking questions of identity discourse, I problematize universal identities. Following Butler (1990a), my inquiry embraces identity complexities. Additionally, to study identity is to be open to the nuance of rhetoric. Anderson (2007) writes, "Identity matters less as something that one 'is' and more as something that one does in language; or, more exactly, identity matters as something that one does to an audience through the expression of who or what one is" (p. 4). Not only do I endeavor to comprehend the complexities of identity, but I understand identity as a rhetorical tool and persuasive strategy. The ExVangelical identity is an appropriate case to unpack to expand on the need to acknowledge the power, complexity, and persuasiveness involved in identity communication.

Second, asking questions of purity discourse from an intersectional perspective allows us to move past understanding purity as involving only gender and sexuality. By complicating the ExVangelical movement, we see the layers involved with American evangelical purity discourse that situate boundaries involving race (Moultrie, 2017), disability (Kenny, 2022), and nationalism (Du Mez, 2020; Moslener, 2015) beyond gender and sexuality. Additionally, I use this inquiry to critically engage with this counter-religious movement by asking questions about how it grapples with intersectionality and how it remains tethered to ideas of white
heteronormativity (McCann, 2014). To examine the ExVangelical identity requires us to be aware of how one cannot separate American evangelicalism and ExVangelicalism from purity discourse. Therefore, my inquiry displays an intersectional approach to investigating and diagnosing purity rhetorics to embrace rhetorics of impurities.

1.1 ExVangelicalism as Case Study: Research Purpose

I argue that ExVangelicals who take part in the ExVangelical movement should be understood as creating a rhetoric of impurities. By studying ExVangelicalism as text, my research purpose is framed by four aims. First, ExVangelicals should be understood as using strategies of place, space, and identification to voice a post-purity identity, reformulate ideologies of impurity by excavating and encountering purity, and utilize storytelling to navigate the religious trauma involved in their rhetorical reconstructions of impurity. Second, these strategies embody the social need to locate purity rhetorics and understand how rhetorics of impurity offer liberation from regulated identity. Third, as a result, I argue scholars must consider the ExVangelical Movement and its wrestling with purity rhetorics as providing an example of how one may work towards a rhetoric of impurities—no matter the context, be it religious, academic, communal, or personal. Fourth, through this inquiry, I provide applicable help for understanding the rhetorical value of storytelling and its impact in both the situating of purity boundaries and in the reconstruction involved with rhetorics of impurity.

To examine the overreaching web of purity rhetorics, I posit that individuals who discursively critique evangelicalism from a post-evangelical perspective offer rich insight into the intimate act of purity consciousness. Not only do ExVangelicals fit this context, but they utilize a counter-religious identity label that places them into a direct position of unpacking purity rhetorics. Therefore, I am curious as to how ExVangelicals use their identity to navigate a
post-purity consciousness where they wrestle with purity’s intersecting authority over their religiosity, body, and sexuality. In this inquiry, I investigate how ExVangelicals construct belonging with their post-purity and in doing so, how they rhetorically excavate and encounter purity rhetorics to create a rhetoric of impurities.

1.2 Research Questions

My inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How is the label “ExVangelical” used as a rhetorical tool to navigate post-purity experiences and purity consciousness?

**RQ2:** How might ExVangelicals use the roles of place, space, and identification to formulate identity within the liminality of impurity?

**RQ3:** How do ExVangelicals navigate the excavation and encountering of purity in order to create a rhetoric of impurities?

Since purity rhetorics are multilayered and authoritative, I practice methodological reflexivity from a queer-feminist epistemology (Misgav, 2016). Doing so allows me not to answer these research questions to locate generalizable and normative findings. Rather, I present the data as helping orchestrate a critical conversation prompted by these questions. Doing so frees the data to exist as is—embodied and liminal—and I will respond to it as it helps us theoretically understand the pervasive nature of purity and the possibilities involved with rhetorics of impurity.

This dissertation involves six chapters helping connect the concepts of ExVangelicalism, purity discourse, post-purity, and a rhetoric of impurities. In Chapter One, I provide scholarly insight into the relationship between American politicism, purity, and evangelicalism. This foundation helps us understand how purity exists culturally, ideologically, and discursively and
needs continued interrogation. In Chapter Two, I present my queer feminist and mixed methods approach to counter-religious storytelling. Through this lens, I begin to explore post-religious rhetoric and the multiple layers involved in purity discourse. In Chapter Three, I analyze qualitative interview data to understand how ExVangelicals leaving evangelical and pure place allows them to wrestle with space provided by their identity of impurities. In doing so, we understand ExVangelicalism as providing space for complex and political agency and the post-purity process. In Chapter Four, I queer both mundane and published stories of purity and post-purity to examine how ExVangelicals depict purity as space orchestrating the body as place in need of purity. From my analysis of qualitative interviews and published ExVangelical memoirs, I argue purity discourse no longer signifies just premarital sex panic rhetorics but issues a larger and more sinister panic regarding the objectification and protection of white womanhood and xenophobic sexuality. In Chapter Five, I posit ExVangelicals deconstruct purity through a rhetoric of impurities. This involves the excavation and encountering of purity in their everyday and is exemplified through both interviews and participant diaries. In the final and Sixth Chapter, I provide direction for scholars to see the purpose of a rhetoric of impurities and how it can be applied to texts beyond the spaces of evangelicalism and evangelical purity culture.

Whether from Chastain’s #Exvangelical podcast, or other ExVangelical resources, the ExVangelical movement continues to thrive through online spaces and remains a rhetorical weighty term. With research addressing ExVangelicalism as a movement motivated by generational responses (Batchhelder, 2020) or as a movement heralded as a socio-religious reckoning of “the willingness of the evangelical movement to put up with anything for power” (Luhrmann, 2021, p. 36), ExVangelicalism is becoming a recognized and compelling religious development worth studying (Kostelich, et al., 2022). However, this scholarship—while
embarking on such investigations into ExVangelicalism, remains tied to the larger phenomenological scope of the movement. This still leaves us questioning what constitutes evangelicalism, what makes up ExVangelicalism, and what exactly is purity? Hence, my inquiry aims to investigate a portion of these questions. I examine how ExVangelicals use their label and storytelling to excavate and encounter notions of purity and evangelical relationships. In doing so, ExVangelicals are creating and navigating rhetorics of impurities. In this dissertation, I investigate and argue that ExVangelicals are reconstructing the purity/impurity binary by partaking in a seemingly impure label (“ExVangelical” as liminal, non-definitive, and in-flux) to critique the purity involved with evangelicalism as it regulates relationship and sexuality. In doing so, ExVangelicals orchestrate belonging as not established through binary boundaries between purity/impurity, but rather as fluctuating in their questioning of previously held beliefs of purity rhetorics. Thereby displaying ways by which purity—as a system, ideology, and discourse—must be questioned.

1.3 Review of Related Literature

To investigate how ExVangelicals utilize the roles of place, space, and identification in the act of excavating and encountering purity to create and navigate rhetorics of impurities, we must first understand the explicit ties between American politicism, purity, and evangelicalism. To do so, this literature review is formatted to expand on certain terms and their context. First, I provide foundational information of American evangelicalism and its political usage of purity discourse. This will lead into a more succinct understanding of the purity/impurity binary I argue is intimately tied to the evangelical ideology and ExVangelical critique. Second, I provide a perspective into the current literature surrounding ExVangelicalism so that we may see how vital post-religious research is to understanding identity rhetorics. Third, I explain the concepts of
place, space, and identification as these rhetorical roles guide my methodological process.

Finally, I explain the groundings of excavating and encountering as I argue this is a theoretical lens in which we can visualize the critical relationship between ExVangelicalism and purity as ExVange

1.4 American Evangelicalism

Due to the context of this inquiry, I explain the historically based and doctrinally defined differences between evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and American evangelicalism’s usage of purity. Not only does this information serve as a foundation which allows us to understand the contextual term “evangelicalism” as it relates to the ExVangelical movement, but by providing the nuanced and complicated history of American evangelicalism, I advance my argument over the intersectional and authoritative nature of American evangelical purity and place myself into a
critical role of investigating this historically punctuated and identity-infused phenomenon (Black, 2022). By differentiating fundamentalism and modernist evangelicalism, I follow previous scholars’ work by first, recognizing both fundamentalism and modernist evangelicalism’s impact on forming contemporary understandings of political American evangelicalism. Sutton (2014) argues WWI was a central pivot in the relationship between evangelicals as this context pushed the premillennialist-liberal battle towards a battle for American ideals and other social and political ramifications. Additionally, I follow what Sutton specifically argues scholars must do in their examining of the phenomenon surrounding American evangelicalism. By examining American evangelicalism as the contemporary practice of evangelicalism, I acknowledge fundamentalism as still present and not a dying breed of religiosity. Before diving into the specific characteristics of fundamentalism and its impact on
American evangelicalism, I first provide a conceptual and historical definition of evangelicalism as a specified Western Christian movement.

1.4.1 Evangelicalism

Balmer (2021) posits that “evangelicalism” can be understood through puritanism, Presbyterianism, and pietism. All three of these—within their historical contexts such as New England, Scots-Irish, and Continentalism—lead to what is known as “the Great Awakening.” Within its “Great Awakening” ideological boundaries, evangelicalism is all obsessive in its introspection, precise in its doctrinal beliefs, and therapeutic in its spirituality. Balmer argues that to identify as an “evangelical,” one must believe that the bible is literal and written as God’s revelation, that conversion—or being “born again”—is the turning point needed, and therefore, must evangelize their faith to grow God’s kingdom. Alongside Balmer, Worthen (2014) and Sutton (2014) define "evangelical" as Christians who are "situated broadly in the Reformed and Wesleyan traditions” and who emphasize “the centrality of the Bible, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the necessity of individual conversion, and spreading the faith through missions" (Sutton, 2014, p. x). While it is necessary to understand the broad definition of evangelicalism and evangelicals—as subscribers to this faith—several religious historians emphasize the scholarly need to engage with fundamentalism’s impact on the structure of political American evangelicalism.

1.4.2 Fundamentalism

In response to US cultural panics in a post-WWII context, Christian fundamentalism started to utilize heavily patriotic rhetoric in their missional goals in opposition to modernist evangelicalism. Sutton (2014) writes of fundamentalism being “baptized…in the waters of patriotic Americanism” (p. 266) and defines fundamentalism as "the interdenominational
network of radical evangelical apocalypticists who joined together to publicly and aggressively herald the imminent second coming while challenging trends in liberal theology and in the broader American culture” (p. 105). In a more succinct, yet poignant statement, Marsden (2006) defines fundamentalism as "militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism” (p. 4). Marsden reminds scholars not to simply define fundamentalism as a temporary offshoot into an old, conservative, uneducated realm of Christianity. Alongside Sandeen (1970), Marsden situates fundamentalism as a part of the “millenarian” movement prodded by the growing number of Christian bible universities and conferences throughout the 20th century. However, unlike Marsden’s initial argument, Sutton (2014) posits the 1925 Scopes trial did not necessarily signify the end of fundamentalism, but did further muddy the term fundamentalist, so much so, that the term evangelical became more popular.

1.4.3 Political American Evangelicalism

Scholars claim American evangelicalism acts as a scope of American conservative Christianity that includes the missional goals of evangelicalism and the patriotism of fundamentalism (Balmer, 2021; Carpenter, 1997; Marsden, 2006; Sutton, 2014; Williams, 2010; Worthen, 2014). By referring to both evangelicalism and fundamentalism within the umbrella term “American evangelicalism” (Williams, 2010), we understand how this evangelicalism encompasses a “fundamentalist mentality” (Carpenter, 1997; Marsden, 2006) and a religion of Christian “rediscovery” (Balmer, 2021). Worthen (2014) argues that American evangelicals are united in three ways. First, American evangelicals focus on repairing a broken relationship between rational and spiritual knowledge. Second, they focus on issues of salvation, and building a relationship with God. Third, American evangelicals aim to resolve tensions between personal faith and the secular community. Moreover, the most important characteristic between
evangelicals and fundamentalists which allows me to present both under the term “American evangelical,” is that both systems of faith wrestle with authority (Sutton, 2014; Worthen, 2014).

Both fundamentalism and evangelicalism’s lack of religious authority compared to other forms of religion carried into their marriage of American evangelicalism. The issue of authority that shapes and defines the nuanced nature of evangelicalism provides an extensive breeding ground for purity ideology to ground itself and grow with its multifaced rhetorics and larger discourse. Evangelicalism’s hyper fixation on purity in faith and of ideology has remained a cornerstone to evangelical culture. The historical underlying nature of purity rhetorics have paved the way to modern understandings of evangelicalism’s fraught relationship with politics of gender, sexuality, and race—therefore reinforcing distinctive concepts of a white evangelical patriarchy. Predicated upon purity discourse, evangelicalism utilizes the intersecting systems of racism and sexism to curate a national religious xenophobia. Evangelicalism’s situating of whiteness and male-centric ideology does not mean only white men take part of its evangelical system. Instead, evangelicalism portrays what Fekete and Knippel (2020) call a “whiteness ontology” where anyone can take part of the oppressive rhetoric of white evangelical patriarchy.

As we examine the discursive structure of purity within the larger construct of evangelicalism, we come to understand with its unique and historical mixture of evangelical missional rhetoric and patriotic fundamentalist impact, evangelicalism—as a whole—continues to search for distinctive authority, beyond sexual abstinence and queer sexuality panics. Therefore, purity ideology exists pervasively as an authority ideology to help make up for evangelicalism’s lack of distinctive religious authority. I position this argument by situating the authority of evangelical purity within an intersectional discourse of order and classification.

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3 For the sake of this inquiry, I refer to American evangelicalism as “evangelicalism” here on out unless I am providing a case where I must differentiate between fundamentalism and modernist evangelicalism.
1.5 The Ideology of Purity

Following Herrmann’s (2021) argument, to understand rhetorical purposes of the ExVangelical identity, their discursive navigation of the dichotomy of purity/impurity is vital. Therefore, it is important to understand purity as an ideology and a discursive implementation into the mundanity of social life. When attempting to comprehend purity discourse’s infiltration within and around evangelicalism, I utilize conceptualizations from Douglas (1966), Foucault (1990), and Shotwell (2016), as they address social purity’s width and breadth across several decades.

Purity discourse situates the intimacy of bodies within cultural rules, often rules of silence (Foucault, 1990). Foucault goes on to state that “modern puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence” (p. 5). Therefore, intimacy of certain type is normalized within strict guidelines, while other intimacies are purposefully left outside of the regulatory norm. Thus, relationship and sexuality are heavily regulated within purity constructs. Through its cultural guidelines, purity discourse is situated within a paradigm that focuses on remaining clear of impurities. Therefore, purity rhetorics often remain tied to panics of secular defilement and ambiguity; utilize metaphoric examples and teachings; and aim to categorize “safe” gender, sex, and race relations. Douglas (1966) writes that purity is “organized by ideas of contagion and purification” and helps produce “iron-hard categories of thought which are heavily safe-guarded by rules of avoidance and by punishments” (p. 6). Hence, purity becomes situated dichotomously.

Purity discourse utilizes boundaries to create a binary of choice between “pure” and “impure” situations. Such rhetorics implement a sense of purity by imposing definitions of what is impure. While striving for purity by evading impurity, individuals exist as always in danger of
defilement, leading to an impure state (Shotwell, 2016). Douglas (1966) argues this is implemented through “ritual avoidance” in which individuals striving for purity must consistently practice rhetorics of avoidance. To avoid what is deemed impure, individuals practice particular abstinence from texts and persons of pollution which may wreak havoc on the order instituted by the binary boundaries of purity/impurity. Thus, purity can situate safe sexuality and unsafe sexuality. This social argument is heavily draped throughout evangelicalism as it utilizes spaces often garnered as paramount to the individual evangelical spiritual health and purpose.

1.5.1 Evangelical Purity

I argue that purity is an intersectional system of environmental classification that curates a systemic sexuality and mode of relation. To encapsulate the rhetorical prowess and the intersecting elements of purity discourse, I position my argument with respect to the concept of rhetorical space. Rice (2012) argues that a community’s political consciousness is pronounced heavily within local space. Therefore, I organize the intersectional nature of purity within five specific spaces: spiritual spaces, the space of the body, relational spaces, C/church spaces, and the space of the nation.

While I argue there are five spaces that purity historically engages with in order to weave its web of classification and power, each space does not stand alone. Purity—like other systems of oppression and domination—is sustained by intersecting components of identity suppression. Therefore, each space’s placement within purity ideology significantly overlaps. Because of this overlap of purity’s influence upon these five spaces—ranging from intrapersonal to mass communicative spaces—individuals raised within the ideology of purity are tethered both
intimately and communally to its classification process. This can be seen through the intimate spaces of the spiritual and body and the communal spaces of the body, C/church, and nation.

The first space of evangelical purity is spirituality. Within the environmental space of the spiritual, purity ideology is structured through rhetorics that signify intrapersonal components to evangelicalism. The ways by which evangelicalism structures its rhetoric surrounding issues of inerrancy, gender identity, and sanctification provide a layer of purity that situates the intimacy of an individual’s religiosity and identity.

One of most prevalent doctrinal exercises within evangelicalism is the argument of inerrancy. Inerrancy—the doctrinal belief that the Christian bible is infallible—allows evangelical doctrine to posit that there exist a certain set of appropriate tools for interpreting biblical text. Worthen (2014) writes, “the doctrine of inerrancy has always been, in its essence, a means of managing the Bible’s vulnerability to subjective judgement” and that a biblical “revelation itself provided evidence of its own perfect authority” (p. 200). DeBerg (2000) writes of the inerrant bible being the best tool fundamentalist and conservative Christians can yield in the face of social changes and movements. Purity—as an ideology of safety from impurity—exists to curate boundaries (Douglas, 1966; Shotwell, 2016). Therefore, in effort to create a boundary between “order” and “chaotic” interpretations of biblical text, inerrancy “provided a trump card” for evangelicals to use to steer away from the threat of “chaotic” interpretations that result from social change and influence (Worthen, 2014, p. 199).

Beyond inerrancy as a doctrinal argument, the question of gender and one’s gender identity remains intrinsically tied to evangelicalism’s position on purity. According to DeBerg (2000), American evangelicals used their belief in inerrancy to combat cultural shifts in gender roles. From this tactic, gender role rhetoric was easily curated and was used in both public and
private spheres. It was argued that if the bible was ignored, then gender roles would become more twisted thus female sexuality could become more toxic. Therefore, gender roles were defined as inherent structures used to regulate women’s sexuality and response to men’s sexuality. The shifting social and cultural dynamics influenced the rhetorical prowess of inerrant argumentation as they were seen as threats to traditional and moral gender roles seen as safeguarding both men’s and women’s sexualities. Bendroth (1993), in their examination of late 20th century fundamentalist evangelical influence of and with gender, argues evangelical religious orthodoxy was structured within a masculine enterprise whereas the “stereotypical language of penitence and surrender in conversion narratives drew heavily from female vocabulary and experience” (p. 22). For example, often the new believer was depicted as a submissive and emotional figure that held “passive virtues of sensitivity and tact” (p. 81) whereas an ongoing believer was depicted as victorious and recognizant of their own power—thus using a “spellbinding platform presence” to confront issues of sin (p. 80). The missional work of the evangelical is masculine, whereas the repentance beliefs of the evangelical are feminine.

Therefore, neo-evangelicals of the mid- to late-20th century and their beliefs of gender identity were not designed to restrict women nor liberate them. Rather, constructions of gender were made in response to a history of militant rhetoric, feminization panics, and social gender role anxieties. Returning to the argument that evangelicals reacted to social currents (Deberg, 2000; Sutton, 2014), in response to shifting tides of gender and national politics, evangelical rhetoric relied on burrowing into its traditional ideology. Thus, molding itself into a religion remaining apologetic (militant), vigorously spiritual (to escape the Church being defined as merely a feminine space), and orthodoxyically defined (remaining inerrant). To abate fears of the
toxicity within social ideologies of gender, evangelicals curate purity boundaries between pure gender identity and impure gender identity and tie these gender identities to functions of their religiosity. With a binary between a socially-situated gender identity (impure) and a religiously-orthodox gender (pure), the individual is taught they have a choice to remain pure even as they wrestle with questions of gender prompted by social gender constructs—as long as they remain committed to gender roles orchestrated through evangelical inerrancy.

Alongside evangelicalism’s utilization of inerrancy as a rhetorical tool and the overt positioning of gender identity to fall in line with their inerrant beliefs, purity can be seen in evangelicalism’s stressing of sanctification—whether of the individual or of the familial or Church structure—instead of community work (Marsden, 2006). During the 20th century, purity within the theological discipline became classified as the gospel, while impure theology was born from secular arguments. On top of this, the practice of “gospel” theology became further classified as a pure principle needing to be protected through victim-age and religious freedom rhetoric (Balmer, 2021). Not only is purity in faith easily held through ideas of sanctification and religious freedom, but by utilizing the binary between pure and impure, evangelicals could distinguish acts between uplifting and protecting their faith (purity) and acts threatening to weaken their faith (impurity).

The second space for evangelical purity is the body. In their examination of mediated discourse being produced within evangelical sex discourse, DeRogatis’ (2015) main focus is on how evangelicals see the sexual body as a key player in two ways. First, the sexual body is important to personal salvation. Second, the sexual body is a graphed space for testifying to one’s faith and belief in their bodies serving as temples to God’s creation. DeRogatis argues the evangelical regulations enforced on the body are not just for their ideals of bodily health, "but
ultimately about the soul" (p. 155) since "bodies filled with the Holy Spirit are shielded from
demonic intrusion” (p. 82). Therefore, evangelicalism historically manages the body by focusing
on issues of sexual purity and the racialization of sexual purity.

Evangelicalism’s focus on the purity of sexuality remained tied to three facets of
sexuality. First, for sexuality to be pure, men’s sexuality had to be defined as more ferocious than
women’s sexuality. Evangelical spokesmen warned young women of the male sex drive. This
was met “somewhat paradoxically” by women’s sex drive being maintained through “restraining
their own desires” (Bendroth, 1993, p. 114). While men’s sexuality was defined as naturally
powerful, the purpose of women’s sexuality was to maintain the man’s sexual performance by
“giving” (p. 98) and “restraining” (p. 114). By doing so, evangelicalism posited purity of the
body as existing within the intimacy of the body’s sexuality and remaining mindful of toxic
femininity as women may still fight for power and men may lose “spiritual power” (p. 115).
Second, for sexuality to remain pure, women must embody the purity as sex happens to them.
Evangelical rhetoric situates seduction and pleasure as equated to power (Bendroth, 1993;
DeRogatis, 2015), therefore, to remain pure, women must play a passive role in sexual
intercourse. If a woman where to play a more active role in her sexuality in effort to partake in
her own pleasure, her power becomes convoluted with the man’s sexual power and thus, she
becomes an impure woman. DeRogatis (2015) argues American evangelicals see the sexual body
as a key player to pure sexuality. The woman’s sexual body is not only seen as a space where the
man’s seductive and sexual power is given room to perform, but the woman’s sexual body is also
important to her and her family’s salvation. This leads to the third point. If sexuality is performed
in purity, it is “sacred and symbolic” as a “testimonial site” (p. 91). For the sexuality to be
performed in purity, it has to follow heterosexual, racially invisible, and marital scripts, thus
existing in religious prescription and ideas of biblical sex. Evangelical purity rhetorics position the sexual body as site of “spiritual battle” (p. 72), therefore, the physical and sexual body can become potential host to “impurities” believed to be brought on through sexually “sinful” acts.

The uninterrogated racialization of sexual purity is often overlooked (Moultire, 2017; Shultz, 2021). In evangelical sexual discourse, DeRogatis (2015) argues that whiteness is discursively related to “purity, godliness, and beauty” (p. 130). This is strategically structured through evangelicalism’s use of white-centricity and consumerism. Bjork-James (2021), Du Mez, (2020), Moultrie (2017), and Viefhues-Bailey (2012) argue that the historical construction of white evangelicalism thrives off of a Christian culture of consumerism. This was done through the popularity of Christian media and conservative Christianity offering security in turbulent times, certainty during social change, and affirmation of white Christian Americans.

Since whiteness is strategically invisible (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Warren, 2003) and heteronormativity silences and orchestrates nonnormative sexualities (Morris, 2007; 2015b), the historic construction of purity has thus invisibly framed white heterosexuality—whether in the focus and usage of the color white to signify purity, purity stories centering white heterosexual characters, or in purity spokespeople remaining largely white and performing heterosexuality. While DeRogatis and Shultz’s work have started to uncover people—specifically women—of color’s purity rhetorics within evangelicalism, Moultrie’s (2017) work provides a womanist perspective into how Black evangelical women must navigate their sexuality as a “sacred act” (p. 9) since “Black women are viewed as hypersexualized and in need of restraint or asexual and too holy for sex” (p. 2). Purity reorients shame back to women’s bodies and in turn, emphasizes historical respectability on women of color’s bodies. Since purity often centers the white heterosexual body (DeRogatis, 2015; Moslener, 2022; Moultrie, 2017; Shultz, 2021), white
women’s bodies are asked to maintain sexual purity while women of color’s bodies are asked to obtain sexual purity (Ramler, 2022).

The third space for evangelical purity is the space of relationships. While it is understandable the ways by which the spiritual and body spaces overlap in relation to evangelical structures of purity ideology, it is the space of relationship that impacts interpersonal religiosity and religious sexuality. From the formations of gender within evangelicalism, there are two relational spaces impacted: gender purity within roles and familial purity.

To understand how gender roles were enacted to procure reliance on gender purity and gender relationship, I return to Bendroth’s (1993) argument that evangelicalism’s construction of gender roles during the 20th century has not been explicitly designed to be anti-woman, but rather, is complicated. Bendroth writes, "masculine and feminine were never mere social categories,” but “reflected the very nature and purpose of God" (p. 98). Order bestowed through the practice of gender roles allowed evangelicals to adopt ideological purity as they followed these roles within gendered and relational spaces.

This argument is further exemplified in Cochran’s (2005), Pace’s (2020), Seat’s (2020), Bowler’s (2019) and Flowers’ (2012) case studies examining various evangelical women’s navigation of and rhetorical savvy within both the purity rhetorics constructing gender roles and the definition of pure gender. Bowler (2019) writes that Christian women can exercise voice through navigations of gendered spaces. Not only do women have to navigate with their faux power, but women must navigate using performances of motherhood, showmanship, sexuality, and vulnerability. This intensive navigation of gendered spaces and rhetorical savvy of gender roles within relationships allows evangelical women to be appointed as “safe.” However, Bowler argues this label of “safe” becomes commodity-like and therefore, can be stripped and difficult to
regain. The overall importance of gender roles to obtain gender purity gave evangelicals foundation of authority to rely on and “was critical to turning back the tide of social chaos” (Du Mez, 2020, p. 81). The translation of women into "roles" of evangelicalism (Barr, 2021) follows the conceptualization of social purity rhetorics—which are employed to provide boundaries that are constructed due to societal panics.

Alongside the practice of gender roles requiring evangelicals to position themselves to enact pure gender, purity within the space of relationships requires evangelicals to utilize gender roles within the family home, parental relationships, and within youth culture. Gender role anxieties work to establish order and place for women and men. Women’s spheres became dictated by the idea of the “divinized home” (DeBerg, 2000). The domestic “home” became a symbol for a divinized and sacred place in which the mother and father had designated roles to ensure the family’s spiritual health. Evangelicals reposition the rhetoric of the domestic into rhetoric of the sacred. Therefore, gender became a purity minefield as the women’s gender was placed in the home as the men’s gender was placed in defense of the home and spiritual community. In regard to purity regulating parental relationships, DeRogatis provides the often-used metaphor of “Holy Sex” where—when sex is done “right”—the sperm becomes God’s sperm and impregnates the couple with His word. Therefore, evangelical sexuality must be heterosexual, racially invisible, and practiced within the sanctity of a Christian marriage (DeRogatis, 2015; Moslener, 2015).

Beyond the structure of the home and parental relationships, evangelicals utilize purity rhetorics to reach youth culture. Luhr (2009) argues this was a foundation to the conservative shift within national politics during the 1960s and forward. The key to this ideological shift focusing on suburban youth culture remains tied to the panicked mentality of protecting the
white middle-class family and home. Luhr writes, “beneath these signifiers of suburban ease remained a deeply conservative message about personal responsibility, respect for authority, and traditional gender roles” (p. 7). Purity discourse teaches young men that their actions and thoughts were either pure or impure, while young women are taught that they themselves are said to be either pure or impure (Ramler, 2022). To maintain purity within the varying familial relationships within the home, conservative Christians idolize self-reliance, personal responsibility, and family values.

The fourth space for evangelical purity is the c/Church. Beyond the intimacies of spiritual and bodily spaces and the interpersonal relational spaces, evangelicalism’s utilization of purity ideology is heavily constructed to rhetorize order of the c/Church space. According to Bendroth (1993), evangelicals, having responded to panics over the feminization of the Church, chose to curate a belief that men were more well-suited for religious aptitude compared to women. By the mid 20th century, the concept of doctrinally minded women became a myth and men were seen as the psychologically stronger gender, ready to defend their evangelical faith. While cultural shifts were happening throughout the 20th century, evangelicals were cataloguing these events as potential challenges to their faith constructs. In response, evangelicals utilized militancy (a male-centric defense of faith), feminization panics (a fear of women’s grab for social and theological power), and gender role anxieties (a classification system to define and confine gender).
Throughout the 20th century, women’s roles within the church shifted in response to cultural shifts (Bendroth, 1993; DeBerg, 2000; Flowers, 2012). Thus, in fear of the c/Church space being infiltrated by secular cultural movements, evangelicalism hyper focused on women’s roles within the church (Flowers, 2012). Flowers posits “changes in women's roles and practices reveal much
about the structures of authority and control within certain societies, particularly religious communities” (p. 6).

The fifth space for evangelical purity is the nation. From Moslener’s (2015) work, we understand that purity rhetorics infiltrate class structures as the 20th century construction of purity were camouflaged middle- to upper-class religious panics. With these considerations, we can begin to problematize evangelicalism’s purity construction as an intersecting rhetoric of classification and order in an effort to preserve a protestant state. In their examination of sexual purity movement rhetorics during the end of the 20th century, Moslener writes of these movements issuing calls “for collective action and social change,” and articulating the nation's future as being “imperiled by sexual immorality” (p. 2). Moslener argues that evangelical spokespersons went so far as to construct “a rhetoric of sexual fear” (p. 76) to link impure sexuality to national decline and state apocalypse. We can understand Moslener’s argument more in depth by examining specific cultural movements during the 20th century that evangelicals used to amplify their rhetoric of sexual fear and to shape their political purity.

Moslener (2022) argues that current understandings of purity culture fail to see how purity started not with a fear of sexualities, but with race. Moslener questions if evangelical purity culture is not just about repression and social control but is deeply rooted in long-standing fears of race mixing throughout US history. While the Civil Rights movement of the early- to mid-20th century took shape, many Black evangelicals “linked their faith with the movement rather than the church” (Sutton, 2014, p. 338), while white evangelicals remained tethered to their tax-exempt status and a political desire to reclaim America’s Christian identity through continued racial segregation (Balmer, 2021; Williams, 2010). Alongside politically racializing it, evangelicals politically gendered purity as well. While arguing against the ERA, “traditional”
women took a somewhat paradoxical and rhetorically effective stance by stepping into the political sphere to argue their position (Solomon, 1978). Even on the seemingly opposite side of Southern Baptist and “traditional” women’s activism, evangelical feminists used personal identity in similar fashion to construct gender authority and agency (Cochran, 2005; Miller, 2015; Ribieras, 2021; Sowinska, 2008; Wilcox, 2016). While conservative evangelical women orchestrated a pure gender by arguing women were inferior to men due to inerrant beliefs (Flowers, 2012) and progressive evangelical women orchestrated a pure gender by arguing women needed to be restudied from an interpretive theology (Cochran, 2005), both parties curated a need to oppose secular feminism’s influence on the Church. Thus, purity maintained a sense of political and nation-wide discourse involving race and gender.

Therefore, purity’s involvement to construct an evangelical authority within a nation-wide environment requires evangelicals to curate a political purity. While this can be historically tracked through the rise of the Christian Right (Williams, 2010) and grassroots organizing for a political religion (Young, 2016), Du Mez (2020) summarizes it well by arguing that evangelicalism will be “at its strongest with a clear enemy to fight” (p. 238) and purity rhetorics will be used to position evangelicalism “as the salvation of American civilization” (Moslener, 2015, p. 3). Political purity captures a Christian nation in a state of panic and offers symbolic representations curated for a wide public to showcase a decaying morality in need of religious political intervention. (Bivins, 2008).

These examples of cultural movements that evangelicalism took hold of to curate their own purity ideology in response showcases not only a religious drive to uphold purity within national movements but allowed evangelicals to construct a political purity in which they can
vacillate purity between private spaces (spiritual, body, home, and c/Church) and public spaces (US politics).

1.5.2 Purity as Intersectional and Authoritative

Following Houser (2021) and Moslener’s (2022) arguments, my inquiry situates purity as an intersectional and authoritative ideology constructed within American evangelicalism. We see this from its threads weaved throughout 20th century evangelical spaces. Not only do we understand purity as a large and participatory discourse that infiltrates discourses of the spiritual, body, relationship, c/Church, and nation, but I argue purity remains thoroughly tied to evangelicalism and its search for authority. To further exemplify how evangelical purity continues to curate order that acts as authority and remain intersectional, I present evangelicalism’s commitment to purity as processed through its focus on youth culture and its usage of panic rhetorics as it forms itself into a political religion to curate a system of safe and pure relations.

Evangelicalism’s commitment to purity works undetected by being practiced within the mundane of youth culture. Luhr (2009) and Moslener (2015) posit purity seeps into youth culture through pop culture and media and has utilized an initiative for self-reliance on the part of the youth to upkeep a pure nation state and becomes embedded in youth memory and nostalgia. This can be pinpointed through the metaphors and rituals youth culture is defined by in evangelical spaces and through teachings imploring youth to “develop a ritualized identity and enter into an extended purity practice” (Moslener, p. 153). Moslener argues evangelicalism’s commitment to purity within youth culture draws upon three connections. First, the aforementioned intersecting layers to purity ideology are taught as commonplace to youth. Second, sexual purity rhetorics are utilized to reinforce the idea of sexuality being a moral issue, not just a physical issue. Third,
with the individualist turn within Protestantism and appropriation of pop media, hyper focusing on youth culture has continued to work well for purity culture. Therefore, purity seeps into the mundanity of participating in evangelicalism and becomes part of the evangelical identity makeup.

Beyond its utilization of youth culture, evangelicalism’s usage of panic rhetorics works to prompt choices of purity being made out of fear of impurity as the binary of purity/impurity is often situated within possible horrific conclusions (Douglas, 1966; Shotwell, 2016). Within evangelicalism, panic rhetorics are rhetorical purity strategies employed through collective emotionality (Irvine, 2002) and religion of fear (Bivins, 2008). Essentially, evangelical usage of fear narrates a dire situation between the promises of purity and consequences of impurities. Bivins writes that the religious use of fear “draw[s] on emotional discourses—those of evangelicalism and those of the popular culture of horror—in order to commend specific cultural, behavioral, and affective responses to the sociopolitical issues it criticizes” (p. 9).

Through the dualistic power of utilizing panic rhetorics to illicit fear within youth culture and to command attention for possibilities of horrific impurities, evangelical discourse remains committed to purity ideology both within the private and public spaces of its political religion status.

While Houser (2021), Kelly and Neville-Shepard (2020) and Manning (2014, 2015, 2017) open the door for communication and rhetoric scholars to investigate American evangelical purity culture, I stress this inquiry further by arguing that we must understand evangelical purity ideology as an intersecting system of environmental oppression that works to

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4 While Manning’s work is insightful and helps bridge a gap between the study of purity culture and subcategories of Communication Studies, this will be the only citation of his work in this dissertation due to ethical concerns on behalf of the dissertation author.
curate a systemic sexuality and religious xenophobia based on a purity/impurity binary. In doing so, we understand purity as it burrows into private and public spaces that evangelicalism has historically crafted for itself. In these environments of the spiritual, body, relationship, c/Church, and nation, we come to understand how purity becomes a mechanism for colonial order and established power distances. Purity culture colonizes sex and bodies by reinstating the colonized view as normative as it seeks to save the morality of a Christian nation whilst Othering non-Christian relations.

It is vital to keep problematizing issues within purity by examining its intersecting oppressions as “unacknowledged and unaddressed” oppressions will always have a “tendency to fester” (Balmer, 2021, p. 67) and gender will continue to be violently produced (Mack et al., 2018) through the means of securing binary-based borders between purity and impurity. Moslener (2015; 2022) writes of purity rhetorics being rooted in national panics and Butler argues that the naming of such national panics allows political evangelicalism to displace its insecurities and find a “restored” purpose (Lempinen, 2022). In order for these to be true, we must understand the intersectional components to purity rhetorics. Purity rhetorics have continued to be fashioned with intersectional oppressions in order to maintain the belief that evangelicalism will not only be “the salvation of American civilization” (p. 3), but to disentangle oneself from evangelical purity should not happen without immense difficulty.

As we recognize purity discourse situated within the political and moral landscape of evangelicalism, we are then able to sift through post-religious stories—or testimonies—which encapsulate religious hauntings acknowledging the deeply-tied threads of white evangelical patriarchy. The specificity involved within the ExVangelical movement presents a case of counter-identities being used to share such testimonies.
1.6 ExVangelicalism

While the term was created in 2016 and has since circulated widely through mediated contexts, functions and characteristics to its name have become a topic in scholarly circles within recent years. Through their autoethnographic work, Herrmann (2021) documents their turbulent experience with the transition from their identity as an evangelical to that of an ExVangelical. Alongside the aforementioned scholarship on evangelicalism, Herrmann argues that cultural shifts play a large role in the individual ExVangelical response as well. Whether from the rise of Trumpian evangelical language and political panics (Herrmann, 2021; Stroop, 2017), antiscientific explanations of climate change (McCammack, 2007), a white-centric panic and silencing of social justice (Deckman et al., 2017; Harris & Steiner, 2018), the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movement(s) (Allison, n.d.; 2021), or the continuation of heteronormative and queerphobic narratives (Wolbrecht, 2010), ExVangelicals may be pushed and prodded by these ever-folding evangelical scripts and cultural shifts. In doing so, ExVangelicals partake in the rhetorical notion that Herrmann (2021) describes as “losing our purities” (p. 423). In Herrmann’s eyes, the intimate experience of deconstructing and reconstructing prior notions of faith requires ExVangelicals to locate other ExVangelicals doing the same in varying ways.

From their rhetorical acts of critiquing self and institution, ExVangelicals are of a “limbo” identity (Blythe, 2018). While a universal definition is not given, Chastain does argue that to identify as ExVangelical, one acknowledges they are in a state of social and religious liminality (Chastain, 2019). While they are not evangelical, they are also not “nones.” This non-dichotomous nor charismatic, yet deeply religious identity is becoming an interesting case of self-identification research (Edwards, 2021). While forming popular understanding within its own circles, the identity label “ExVangelical” is not an organized juncture and has no established
doctrine nor denomination. Herrmann (2021) writes of the ExVangelical “collective” voice coming from the sharing of stories. Whether from stories of “impurity,” “the shamed,” or “the formally silenced,” Herrmann argues they have power and provide dimension to the counter and transitional religious label (p. 427).

While a term short of existing a decade thus far, ExVangelicals have been examined through a lens of a religious attachment/unattachment paradigm. Davis (2019) examines ExVangelicals’ identity struggle from the standpoint of attachment and spiritual abuse. Utilizing a covenant epistemology and Fowler’s (1995) stages of faith development, the author centers women as individuals leaving evangelical spaces due to abuse experienced but remaining attached to their evangelical roots as they remain committed to components of their faith. It is important to note, the racial identity of the “women” leaving evangelical spaces was not specified. However, Moslener (2022) argues that stories told by women and women-read ExVangelicals often identify as white. Brower (2021) examines the ExVangelical plight and attachment narratives from their personal experience as a queer evangelical. From their arts-based research, Brower compares their performance of ExVangelical transition alongside the performance of a queer conservative, Hindu named Ari. While largely a performance piece focusing on the theater creation model, Brower argues that the examination of these transitional and counter-religious identities enriches and invigorates intersectional research.

Beyond religious trauma and attachment narratives, scholars have asked questions pertaining to ExVangelical leaders and the memorialization of their pioneering work. Andersen (2020) analyzed Rachel Held Evans—a well-known provocateur of US evangelical theology—whose work chronicled their own transition from evangelical to ExVangelical. Andersen asks not only how Evans’ work—since ended abruptly due to Evans’ passing—is carried out by an
ExVangelical movement attempting to center women, non-binary, queer, and voices of color, but also how Evans’ work is being memorialized by a growing movement. Mannon (2019) cross examines two prominent writers and women theologians who have used personal narrative rhetoric to construct their ExVangelical identities. By focusing on Sarah Bessey and Jen Hatmaker, Mannon argues that these women authors subvert normative white evangelical narrative by offering self-religious critique appropriated from Black evangelical women’s rhetorical styling. West (2021) examines ExVangelical literature’s themes of leaving evangelicalism. From their cross-examined review, West posits ExVangelical literature, or stories of leaving, are not black and white, nor are they solidary works.

Therefore, in pursuit of understanding the rhetorical components involved with the ExVangelical identity and its relationship to acknowledging evangelical purity, I posit examining ExVangelical stories from a rhetoric foundation allows us to see the nuance involved with counter-religious testimonies. Beyond understanding the experiences of post-evangelicalism, through this inquiry I address and bridge a gap between purity ideology and the rhetorical functions involved with offering a rhetoric of impurities. Relying largely on Douglas’ (1966) and Shotwell’s (2016) work, the ideology of purity exists as a colonialized classification system and that the radical response to such is to embrace an impure state. Shotwell specifies that to transition from purity—or a mindset where one aims for purity consistently—one must find ways to live ethically impure within “new” and “open normativities” (p. 139). This requires us to

5 Sarah Bessey is most well known for her 2013 book, Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible’s View of Women.

6 After posting pro-LGBTQ comments on social media in 2016, LifeWay Christian Stores pulled Hatmaker’s women-centered books from their shelves (Shellnutt, 2016).
conceptualize ways by which our notions of purity/impurity are coconstructed relationally and individually.

From the literature regarding evangelical purity ideology, we understand that such purity discourse will always be unethical as it requires evangelicals to take an individualized personal purity approach to spiritual, physical, and relational embodiment. This prompts individuals to ignore the lived and complex reality of our entangled world. Shotwell writes, “personal purity is simultaneously inadequate, impossible, and politically dangerous for shared projects living on earth” (p. 107). ExVangelicals, having experienced a culture enforcing personal purity for the sake of societal purity, may understand this implication all too well. Having experienced purity rhetorics manipulating them to hyper focus on their own bodily and soul impurities, they fail to understand how their embodiment impacts those around them. Therefore, to partake in a post-evangelical purity religion, these individuals must relearn how to embody themselves, strive away from personal purity, and locate others attempting to embody similar objectives. This is further encouraged as Shotwell writes that the “the meaning of our willing is determined only in relation to others” (p. 131). ExVangelicals—as they explicate themselves from purity rhetorics—may need other ExVangelicals since “our freedom is inextricably entangled with and constituted through other beings’ freedom” (p. 131).

While ExVangelicals, have been studied in their relation to evangelicalism (Batchelder, 2020; Luhrmann, 2021), how they utilize mediated spaces to construct their identity (Fekete & Knippel, 2020; Campbell, 2021), and how their label offers space to understand liminal Christianities (West, 2021; Brower, 2021), through my dissertation, I aim to investigate how ExVangelicals navigate purity outside the boundaries of evangelicalism through the usage of rhetorical tools. Through a rhetorical lens I aim to examine how ExVangelicals’ usage of
storytelling is used to locate purity discourse in an effort to dismantle purity and embrace impurities (Shotwell, 2016). Through their rhetorical excavation and encountering of purity, ExVangelicals provide an example of engaging with rhetorics of impurities. Therefore, from this dissertation, I argue that ExVangelicals utilize place, space, and identification in order to create rhetorics of impurities that include strategies of excavating and encountering evangelical purity. Hence, rhetoric has a role in addressing Shotwell’s argument for embracing the possibilities of impurities. In the following sections, I expand on this argument by providing literature on the roles of place, space, and identification followed by the rhetorics of excavating and encountering as these remain key rhetorical functions within the rhetoric of impurities.

1.7 The Role of Place, Space, and Identification

As argued previously, purity discourse situates individuals as key players in the restoration of a pure nation state. Therefore, the rhetorics involved with the purity binary are intimately woven into the identity, experiences, and religiosity of post-evangelicals. To understand more explicitly how ExVangelicals use their identity to excavate and encounter purity discourse in effort to perform a social criticism of purity and create rhetorics of impurity, I argue place, space, and identification become part of and play a vital role in excavating and encountering purity.

1.7.1 Rhetorics of Place and Space

I focus on rhetorics of place and space as I aim to ask how ExVangelicals use their identity to rhetorically construct belonging. Not only do ExVangelicals wrestle within a purity/impurity dichotomy, but the purity discourse of evangelicalism utilizes rhetorics of place and space to situate boundaries between purity and impurities. Therefore, examining rhetorical sites of place allows me to ponder my research questions further. However, when asking of place
and space, I do not mean only physical boundaries involved to create an enclosure (Massey, 1991), but place and space as a cultivation of culture and identity (hooks, 2009; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). While I examine the dyadic value of both place and space—as they both require each other—I also acknowledge how the rhetorics of place and space have distinctive components. While space remains abstract and offers points of sense-making and place acts as an entity where discourse takes shape (mcclellan, 2008), both offer a rhetorical experience where one can question the space and place of locating belonging, or experiences of nonaversive and ongoing relationships that foster adaptability and personal well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The relationship between space and place can be understood by how individuals make sense of them. mcclellan explains this by providing the example of a public park being a place that offers spaces of rest for a tired pedestrian while the park could also be a place offering historical context of the city for a tourist. Research into the meaning-making of place and space has examined public structures and landscapes (Haskins & DeRose, 2003; Powell, 2007; Rice, 2012) and commemoration and public memory (Blair, Dickinson, & Ott, 2010; Moss & Inabinet, 2021). However, since ExVangelicalism—as a movement—does not exist within a bounded site with physical characteristics, I utilize rhetorics of place and space to question how ExVangelicals exercise belonging. To do so, I utilize hooks’ conception of place and Moreland (2019) and Hawhee’s (2006) arguments of the rhetoric of space.

While place can be constituted by physical structures or objectivity, Powell (2007) argues that place exists influx with questions of objectivity and subjectivity and of location and sociality. In Belonging: A Culture of Place (2009), hooks provides insight as to how the recognition of place and belonging to a place of critical thought can offer hope. Recognitions of
place allows us to embrace diverse ecosystems and locate resources for self-understanding. hooks argues when we renew our relationship with place, we can partake in “collective self-recovery” (p. 40). Alongside hooks, Massey argues creating place allows individuals to create one’s culture (Warburton, 2013). Place can become a location of possibility and transgressive value. hooks writes of place becoming “a location of possibility” where inhabitants can “make their own rules” and that “laws [can] be broken and boundaries [can] be transgressed” (p. 55). hooks also argues that by gaining critical recognition of place and questioning experiences of belonging allows individuals to see how place can offer insight into racial, sex, gender, sexuality, and ability/disability identities. Beyond insight, acknowledging place allows individuals to see the multiplicity of identities (Massey, 1991).

Not only does recognition and curation of place and belonging allow individuals pursuit of locating place—whether literal or figurative—but hooks (2009) offers a continued pursuit of place that addresses how to exist in place as a critical steward to what it offers. hooks writes, “To tend the earth is always then to tend our destiny, our freedom and our hope” (p. 117). To tend to one’s place, one must not lose sight of how their place must ultimately offer them liberation of self. Additionally, this allows one to understand how cultivating place is not stagnant, but is a process (Massey, 1991). hooks (2009) offers insight into how this tending of place can be made possible. One way is to acknowledge how “power [is] shared” (p. 142). Therefore, place must be fashioned around needs of those in a place. One must also recognize when place encourages interaction and when it beckons one to partake in solitude. hooks writes, place “invites one to be still—to hear divine voices speak” (p. 152) while using the metaphor of her back porch in her Kentuckian house as a place that ushers her to be still while other house porches invite neighborly conversations.
Interestingly, hooks argues that to discover place, one discovers the threads of their own upbringing. The author writes of their experiences being a writer that returns to rural Kentucky after leaving their childhood Kentucky location to experience urban life. This departure and return to the physical place of upbringing allows hooks to visualize her place as a writer. She states, “all the writing I have done and currently do has the particular flavor of my growing up in rural Kentucky hills as a child then later in town” (p. 169). To acknowledge and critically engage with questions of place and belonging, one can embrace diverse ecosystems and locate resources for self-understanding. They can participate in collective self-recovery, create their own culture, and be afforded insight into experiences of identity. To curate place, one must tend to their place as it offers liberation, acknowledge how power is dictated, how needs are addressed, and differentiate when their place encourages keeping company or solitude. Ultimately, acknowledgment of place asks one to recognize their upbringing and how it situates their experiences of place and belonging. In this sense, examining rhetorics of place allows us to question specific, locatable, or paused texts (Blair, Dickinson, & Ott, 2010).

Alongside examining rhetorics of place within ExVangelical phenomenological texts, I examine rhetorical space as the "geography of a communicative event" (Mountford, 2003, p. 17). While place is more specific or locatable, space is broad, open, and involves movement (Blair, Dickinson, & Ott, 2010). To examine rhetorics of space, I utilize Moreland’s (2019) argument that bodies create meaning and therefore, play a part in the rhetorics of discourse. A body is a rhetorical space that juxtaposes rhetorics of place and rhetorics of embodiment through the act of intersecting the two. The places our bodies occupy ensue communication and impact ways our bodies are located (Warren, 2003). While Hawhee (2006) displays parts of this theory through their argumentation for students’ bodies experiencing rhetorics of history through lessons that
require the physical body to be the main rhetorical tool, Moreland (2019) exemplifies this theory through the tracing of trauma within and upon narrations of the body.

In rhetoric’s ability to be conducted within the space of bodies, I aim to examine purity discourse as its rhetorical functioning utilizing the space of bodies and voice, since voice is attached to the body (Watts, 2001). As argued previously, evangelical purity affect remains tied to the body, and therefore trains the individual to behave in certain ways in effort to obtain purity (for white evangelicals) or attain purity (for evangelicals of color). Moreland’s (2019) body as space allows me to ask how purity discourse involves rhetorics of the body, as the body—both as a space and a visual—functions rhetorically, and how articulations of trauma can be reoriented to understand identity and belonging.

While rhetorics of place can be both the physical and non-physical ways of acknowledging one’s existence in certain ways, rhetorics of space allow one to acknowledge the ways by which their ideology exists in certain ways. Place may have preconceived meaning or expectations (Powell, 2007) and exists inside of space. However, space is used to formulate meaning and draw connections. Importantly, to examine rhetorics of place and space, the critic needs to acknowledge their meaning-making. For example, biology acts as place since the biologist looks at a specific piece of evidence. They take in the details to formulate the evidence’s meaning. While place can be articulated through biology, space is ecology as the ecologist is not looking at a single element or a series of elements, but rather, they examine the meaning that comes out of all the elements involved. Since meaning comes out of space, space helps one form meaning, however, place has the capacity to allow one to acknowledge and locate possibilities of meaning.
If the places that ExVangelicals work within are in the affirmation of ExVangelicalism (social gatherings with other ExVangelicals, utilizing social media to locate other ExVangelicals, or para-socially engaging with ExVangelicals in the places of podcasts, memoirs, blogs, etc.) or the dissent of evangelicalism (choosing to leave the place of c/Church, refusing to gather socially with other evangelicals, etc.), they acknowledge how their communication within and of these places impacts their identity and sense of belonging. And if these places are recognized, then the space of their bodies and voices can be situated as rhetorically producing the ideology behind their identity and sense of belonging. How their bodies perform ExVangelicalism and how their voices are used to express ExVangelicalism provide insight into the rhetorics of spatial ExVangelicalism. As previously argued, purity discourse situates the body as being paramount to navigating the evangelical binary of purity and impurity. Therefore, not only do ExVangelicals use rhetorics of place to locate each other, experience specific ExVangelical identity-making, and actively acknowledge how to curate places of belonging, but by utilizing Moreland’s body as space, I aim to also understand the deeply involved ways by which evangelicalism uses the body to formulate boundaries between purity and impurity and how ExVangelicalism recognizes this and communicates a need to dissociate from this binary.

1.7.2 Identification

In order to understand how ExVangelicals utilize layered rhetorics of place and space to foster a counter community that excavates and encounters purity discourse, I argue we must appreciate the theoretical components of identification. In the following section of this literature review, I present identification as a key construct to the ExVangelical identity-making and social criticism of purity.
As a rhetorical concept, identification is both simple in nature, yet complex. We understand that identification is a qualifying aspect of rhetoric (Burke, 1969). On a fundamental level, by using identification and categories of being, Burke argues that one implies division between categories of being and categories of not-being. For example, if an individual identifies as “ExVangelical,” we can assume they do not identify as “evangelical.” However, identification can also be understood rhetorically by how individuals may be called into being. This allows room for nuance of identification and self-understanding. Hence, "belonging" becomes rhetorical. Beyond the recognition of place and space to create a sense of belonging, one’s identification indicates ways by which one longs to belong and in what fashion that belonging is curated. Essentially, the ways by which we feel we belong will constitute the ways we behave. In relationship to Moreland’s body as space, examining rhetorics of identification allows us to ask questions of the rhetoric involved with embodiment due to identity rhetoric.

Charland (1987) writes that "to be an embodied subject is to experience and act in a textualized world.” And while this textual world is “not seamless,” an individual’s sense of identification “can be laced with contradictions" (p. 142). Hence, to ask questions of identification becomes nuanced as embodiment does not remain straightforward or continuous. Charland’s constitutive rhetoric shows us how our identity is rhetorically constructed through fragments in which we are called into being. Anderson (2007) argues that examining these fragmented rhetorics of identification help us understand the strategies involved with ever-transitioning identities. Following Burke, Charland, and Anderson, we can discern rhetoric’s nuance by examining identity transitions. This can be seen through “memoirs of transformation” and “stylized responses” to questions of counter-identities. By examining transitional identities (such as ExVangelical), we can map out agency-making and the limits to agency, and ultimately,
see how viewing identity rhetorically allows us to view identity as a “persuasive strategy” (Anderson, 2007). Therefore, by asking questions of the rhetoric involved with identification—both in how one expresses belonging and how one uses their identity to perform a persuasive act—we ask questions of an identity’s audience.

Anderson writes of identity mattering “as something that one does to an audience through the expression of who or what one is” (p. 4). By pondering the audience of ExVangelicals, we may be offered insight into how belonging is rhetorically constructed beyond questions of place and space. By examining the rhetorics of identity, we understand contextual practices of ExVangelicals currently (Fekete & Knippel, 2020) and a larger context of an individual choosing to identify through religious “hauntings” (Enns & Myers, 2021). The identification process experienced by ExVangelicals communicates a larger context of post-religious individuals attempting to critically engage with the purity binary -invoked American evangelical xenophobic sexuality.

While taking part in this embodied work, ExVangelicals co-create belonging by critically engaging with place and acknowledging space. Therefore, as I step into this inquiry as critic and researcher, I aim to uncover testimonies displaying the possibilities involved with rhetorics of impurities. In doing so, we understand the roles of place, space, and identification as ExVangelicals utilize rhetorical excavating and encountering purity to embrace new impurities.

1.8 Excavating and Encountering Purity

Due to purity being constructed within and around evangelicalism, we understand purity as multilayered, intersectional, and authoritative. Therefore, individuals who leave evangelicalism—such as ExVangelicals—are not only distancing themselves from the doctrinal fabrication of the religion (as previous research examining ExVangelicalism has thoroughly
displayed), but are in essence, unweaving themselves from the web of purity discourse that situates purity/impurity on a binary. I argue the act of the using the label “ExVangelical” has a twofold theoretical purpose: to excavate and to encounter impurity.

ExVangelicals, in their plight to divorce from white evangelical patriarchy and reconstruct their religiosity to fit a non-purity-panicked version of faith that recognizes its systemic xenophobia, partake in critique. Following Jennifer Schepfer Hughes' argument for the impossibility of uncoupling Latin American Christianity from colonial violence (Barreto & Sirvent, 2019), it is impossible to delink deconstructed evangelical rhetorics from imperial and colonial purity. On top of this, ExVangelicals commit to this work by curating an identity label that necessitates their critical prerogative (Edwards, 2021; Fekete & Knippel, 2020; Gushee, 2020) and utilizes Moros’ concept of “indecent theologies” (Barreto & Sirvent, 2019, p. 197), such as womanist, liberation, indigenous, ecofeminist, Christian anarchist theologies (Woodley & Sanders, 2020) and queer theology (Tonstad, 2018). In doing so, ExVangelicals can be understood as creating strategies to partake in rhetorics of impurities.

Specifically, ExVangelicals’ must partake in excavations and encounters. Enns and Myers (2021) write that the term “excavate” is used to uncover a “legacy [that] has been buried (often intentionally so), dismembered, or devised in order to erase traumas endured and inflicted" and the term "encounter" is used to exemplify, not "head knowledge, but an engagement of mind and heart, body and soul, self and society" (p. 53). Simply put, to endeavor with rhetorics of impurities, one must utilize excavation to acknowledge purity and must encounter purity by embracing new impurities.
1.8.1 Rhetoric of Excavating

While Enns and Myers position rhetorics of excavation as simply “uncovering” something hidden, the literature surrounding this term situate it as needing more attention. Lucas (2001), defines excavation as “a crossing of a limit which is expressed through the feelings of loss” (p. 35). This transgression of sorts, acknowledges a “loss of ‘purity’ or ‘integrity’” (p. 36). Lucas argues that in a context where preservation is seen as ideal, enacting excavations is a more radical act. Excavating pauses production, takes finite text and readjusts it as raw material ready to be interrogated, redefines issues seen as non-renewable, and questions both the past and the present as key players in perception.

Beyond understanding excavating as an uncovering of camouflaged issues, the act of excavating is an ongoing process. Mathieu (2014) posits that to excavate a hidden issue, one must become mindful of the mundanity of language, recognize the choice involved in one’s relation to their thoughts and experiences instead of merely remaining a subject to them. Mathieu labels the act of excavating as an act of secular mindfulness. With their argument uses the inner critic involved with post-doctoral pedagogy, Mathieu presents excavation as a risky maneuver that offsets predisposed ideas of order. While Lucas (2001) offers insight into excavation through archeological work, Mathieu (2014) through collegiate pedagogy, and Enns and Myers (2021) present it as an act of recognizing religious hauntings, excavation can be seen as a rhetorical act of questioning assumed categories of being and relating.

However, Lucas posits that critiquing the rhetorics of excavation is difficult as excavation is often placed in a paradoxical relationship with rhetorics of conservation. In order to partake in excavation, one must remain recognizant of the role of conservation. One asks, what belongs?, what remains rooted and in need of re-fertilization?, and what is purposeful in the foundations of
site? Through the act of excavating, individuals do not only ponder what needs to be extracted or deconstructed, but they also contemplate what must be conserved. Through this dualistic excavatory work that encapsulates questions of both conservation and removal, one can begin to partake in encountering, thus allowing one to embrace new ways of interacting within a site. Alongside, Lucas, I argue examining rhetorics of excavation alongside rhetorics of encountering when considering the context of counter religious identity construction is helpful to move past assumptions of Western religious deconstruction (Edwards, 2021; Fekete & Knippel, 2020; Garrison, 2020) and pursue critical reflection of deconstruction as a process—ever evolving (Lucas, 2001).

1.8.2 Rhetoric of Encountering

To theoretically understand the rhetorical act of encountering, appreciating it as a relational transaction helps situate it as an act to produce new modes of relating. First, encounters acknowledge a site where negotiations of difference take shape. Second, qualities of what has been non-represented previously can be drawn upon to offer new theories (Wilson & Darling, 2016). To encounter something is to engage with experiences or cultures of difference (Faier & Rofel, 2014). Beyond helping to create new theories, the act of encountering experiences of difference allows for new identities to take shape. With new identities forming, new categories of knowledge can be built and acknowledged. Not only do these categories help in social relationships (ExVangelical ↔ their audience), but the encountering of new categories establishes new modes of relating in human-nonhuman relations (Faier & Rofel, 2014). The opening of new religious categories offers individuals paths towards relearning religious doctrines, practices, and theologies.
Therefore, ExVangelical engagement work must uncover (excavate) and relearn (encounter) the histories of their religious tradition through stories of trauma. Whether this trauma is individually or collectively experienced, Enns and Myers (2021) urge scholars to examine the discursive nature of trauma as it is embodied, colonized, and politically urgent. To inquire into how ExVangelicals situate themselves as actively excavating and encountering to critique old categories of purity and recreate new modes of relating to impurity, it is vital to examine how rhetorics of place, space, and identification play a role in how ExVangelicals navigate experiences of possible religious trauma. By analyzing their rhetorical constructions of place, space, and identification, we may learn how they produce belonging by excavating purity rhetorics within evangelicalism and recognizing how purity can be encountered to create rhetorics of impurities.
CHAPTER 2
Examining Spoken, Written, and Published Tales of Purity: A Mixed Methodology

The concept of purity remains larger than its often-produced anti-abortion narratives, panics regarding sexuality, and sexual abstinence-only education initiatives. As argued previously, purity exists as a discursive web weaving together narratives of moral and political issues within the American demographic. Beyond its hyper-fixation on gender and sexuality, purity discourse situates white womanhood as a concept needing protection and in doing so, contributes to experiences of disembodiment. While the rhetoric of purity within evangelical America seems to focus on bodily safety, as DeRogatis (2015) points out, purity discursively latches onto the concept of relationship. By doing so, I argue purity discourse exemplifies a xenophobic sexuality—meaning, each relationship encountered and performed must fit purity guidelines.

As the literature presented in the previous chapters display, purity discourse is the heartbeat of white-ontological American evangelicalism and therefore, is a heavily contested discourse by those critiquing evangelicalism: ExVangelicals. I propose a need to explore the ExVangelical movement and ExVangelical’s rhetorical use of place, space, and identification to navigate the liminality inherent within a post-purity (or impurity) process. From here, I am curious as to how ExVangelicals rhetorically excavate and encounter sites of purity to create a rhetoric of impurities—a way by which individuals can untangle purity discourse from their bodies and their idea of self, or as DeRogatis writes, their souls. To explore these questions and place them in conversation with one another, I examine purity-as-discourse and the ExVangelical response to it through three case studies using mixed methodologies and three forms of data-as-texts: interviews, memoirs, and participant diaries. In this chapter, I position myself as taking a
mixed methodological approach in my analysis of a triangulated ExVangelical text. In the first few sections, I justify my mixed methodological approach and outline both qualitative and critical rhetoric methods as working together to form critical qualitative methods. The second half of this chapter outlines the methods I employ within my three case studies.

The lens by which I explore the rhetorical construction of purity and the deconstruction of purity by the ExVangelical movement needs to be fluid, transparent, and critical. As Brower (2021) and Greenough (2017) argue in their work, counter-religious storytelling can motivate intersectional analyses of gender, sexuality, race, and religion. Additionally, as Moslener (2022), Moultrie (2017), and Natarajan et al. (2022) argue, the construction and performances of purity need to be explored with an intersectional lens through which purity’s influence in socio-religious ideas of gender, race, sexuality, and bodies is questioned. To explore different methods of counter-religious storytelling from an intersectional lens, I employ queer feminist criticism (Misgav, 2016) that explores religious rhetoric and the multiple layers involved with identity communication.

2.1 A Justification for a Mixed Methodological Approach

In my examination of purity discourse and the ExVangelical response to it, I argue that ExVangelical’s response to move away from purity’s silencing of impure sexualities is to offer up their identity as a counter-religious identity. Thus, I explore the relationship between a public (purity discourse) and its counterpublic (ExVangelicalism). Warner (2005) argues that studying publics and counterpublics forces the critic into a space of asking questions of the non-normative. In my excavation of this counterpublic, I follow Asen (2000) by examining the articulations of exclusion through discourses of alternative norms and practices. Asen asks scholars to uncover what makes counterpublics 'counter.' By doing so, I seek ways by which
participants articulate their counter-responses. As I approach my inquiry of purity discourse and the counter-religiosity surrounding it, I utilize a mix of critical rhetorical methodology and qualitative methodological approaches to locating voice. With a mixed methods approach, I can move fluidly and beyond the constraints of what Hesse-Biber (2010) calls “methodological orthodoxy” (p. 455). Through non-conformed methods, I visualize and investigate data that strives to exist and exercise voice outside of conformed religiosity. Through a mixed critical qualitative inquiry (CQI), I understand my data as both historical texts involved with discourse (Baskerville, 1977; Black, 2022) and as a living community (Morse, 1991) that exists as a continuously developing phenomenon of personal identity communication needing to be demystified (McKerrow, 1989).

This inquiry requires three subfields within Communication Studies to be utilized. First, this project necessitates feminist criticism. Schultz (2021) argues that to study the workings of ExVangelicalism is to recognize feminist awakenings and reconstructions of evangelical purity-influenced ideologies. To investigate ExVangelical testimony in an effort to inquire how this label is used to counter a system and navigate the transitional and liminal spaces outside of it, I must endeavor to represent these myriad voices and the differences inherent in their conceptualizations of what it means to be an “ExVangelical.”

Second and third, this inquiry asks questions of religious rhetoric and identity communication. Maguire (2007) reminds scholars that religion is uniquely influential. Therefore, to examine the rhetoric entwined with the ExVangelical plight is to acknowledge ways by which religion is multifaceted and carries stories of liberation and oppression simultaneously (Gudorf, 2007). Hence, my examination encourages me to contextualize the rhetoric presented in religious and counter-religious texts whilst also asking questions about how relationship is formed through
identity. The term “ExVangelical” is not merely a label by which an individual identifies religiously, but it also prompts the identifier towards practices of self-criticism (Gudorf, 2007) and therefore, is linked intimately to the body (Ellingson, 2017). With these distinctive research needs, I approach the data utilizing all three. To do so, I embark on a mixed methodological approach that responds to multilayered components built into this counter-religious label.

### 2.2 Mixed Methodology

Through the rhetorical acts of excavating and encountering their religious hauntings, ExVangelicals engage in complex and liminal identity constructions. In doing so, they use varying textual places to create a space of belonging. By investigating the multilayered phenomenon of this counter-religious movement, I employ an analysis with a mixed methodological lens allowing me to explore multiple methods of storytelling. Historically, mixed methods were born out of a need to understand research designs that hold complex data, to reach more accurate levels of validity, and overall, to strengthen claims (Creswell, 2003; Sandelowski, 2003). While mixed methods utilize more than one method of collecting and analyzing data, I implement this dualistic methodology to unmask complex data. In doing so, I think critically about my methodological footprint before the implementation of a theoretical claim (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Since ExVangelical communication is largely driven by testimony (Brower, 2021; Herrmann, 2021; Mannon, 2019; West, 2021), mixed methods allow me to examine such stories from multiple vantage points and discursive layers. Therefore, my mixed methodological approach marries qualitative method’s focus on centering multivoicedness (Aveling et al., 2014) and critical rhetoric’s emphasis on understanding everyday rhetoric from a critical lens (Endres et al., 2016). In the following two sections, I expand on this by positioning my argument in favor of what qualitative methods can offer followed by how critical rhetoric guides my inquiry and
researcher role. From my understanding of these two schools of methodological practice, I present my mixed approach: Critical Qualitative Inquiry (CQI).

2.2.1 Qualitative Methods

At its foundation, qualitative methods ensure researchers consider two essential components of their qualitative-derived work: the quality of interpretation they produce from a data set and their reflexivity. To qualify their interpretation of their data, Tracy (2010) presents eight vital criteria qualitative researchers must consider. First, researchers must approach their research purpose by examining a worthy topic. The topic must be important not only due to its wide-reaching phenomenological consequences but must also provide contextual clues towards problem-solving. Second, whilst engaging with their research, the qualitative researcher must exercise rich rigor. Through meticulous work, the researcher’s care for the data should provide insight into its multiplicity. In doing so, the researcher accomplishes the third criterion: maintaining sincerity. The researcher must be open with their interpretive work and present an honest analysis. Fourth, the researcher must establish and uphold credibility. This requires the researcher to obtain pre-study credibility in how they approach their topic, credibility in how they conduct their study, and credibility in how they argue their findings to present a case. Fifth, when constructing their study’s findings, the researcher must curate resonance. Their study—as a whole—must be vibrant and provide evocative conclusions that add layers to ongoing discussions. Additionally, the sixth criterion that must be met is in how the researcher addresses the “So What?” of their study. They must provide a significant contribution to social discussions needing attention. Seventh, the researcher must remain committed to the ethical bounds of their qualitative research. By participating ethically, the researcher produces work that can be used as scholarly groundwork for future studies. Finally, the researcher must write their study with
meaningful coherence. This eighth criterion requires the study to be approached, conducted, and presented in a consistent and organized manner that articulates its contributions.

Not only must qualitative researchers hone strong interpretive skills, but they must also practice self-reflexivity (Aveling et al., 2014). Janesick (1994) argues that to represent data through reflexive interpretation, the qualitative researcher must resituate the data to express the relationship between participants and the researcher. Referencing Erickson (1986), Janesick uses the metaphor of a choreographed dance to express the vitality of qualitative work by stating that qualitative research must be “a matter of ‘substance, focus, and intent’” (p. 44). According to Bahrami et al. (2016), the qualitative researcher plays an important role by remaining the "main tool" and "an accreditation factor to the data" (p. 28). Thus, through reflexive work, the study obtains substance, focus, and intent and the researcher ultimately performs care towards the data. This performance of care allows the researcher to use their qualitative work to center lived voices and move towards their data with love that strengthens their contribution and purpose (Ulmer, 2017). The criteria involved with honing interpretive skills and addressing one’s study through reflexivity is vital as qualitative researchers must provide insight into contextualized situations (Krog, 2018; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Following this methodological practice allows me to embrace the data as embodied and multilayered.

### 2.2.2 Critical Rhetoric

While qualitative methods encourage the researcher to approach their data with strong interpretive skills and self-reflexivity, approaching data as researcher-critic allows the researcher to consider the rhetoric (the enactment and participation in language) and the rhetorical field (the examination of everyday and mundane rhetorics) to examine culture from a critical perspective and ask questions of performances within everyday encounters. Examining rhetoric from a
critical lens assists the researcher’s effort to examine the rhetoric of everyday life. Hawhee (2006) situates rhetoric as a component of both mass and intimate experiences since rhetoric is not "just a cerebral, conscious process," but is also “messy, unpredictable, and that, at some level at least, the body is involved" (p. 157).

Additionally, examining rhetoric from a critical lens further allows the researcher to reflect on their positionality to the text and its multilayered context (Ferrell, 2019). As Endres et al. (2016) argue for critical researchers of both qualitative and rhetoric methods to examine culture from a critical perspective and ask questions about performances of everyday encounters, the researcher must understand their own relationship to their research. Alongside qualitative methods, critical rhetoric requires the critic to employ reflection in their analysis that directly implicates their positionality. Glenn (2018) describes this role as examining the “ethical relationship between researcher and research subject” (p. 100). Morris (2007, 2015a) does so by displaying how the personal reflection of the critic disrupts heteronormative narratives by examining the text with “queer ideas about context” (2015a, p. 226). With the critical need for the critic’s self-reflection, critical rhetoric paves space for the researcher to examine the multilayered notion of a rhetorical text.

Along with examining texts of the mundane and implicating the researcher’s position to the text and its context, critical rhetoric magnifies a critical theoretical purpose. Particular to the method of rhetorical criticism, Mckerrow (1989) defines critical rhetoric as a perspective on rhetoric that explores, in theoretical and practical terms, the implications of a theory that is divorced from platonic constraints. Therefore, using critical rhetorical methods allows one to move away from locating absolutes, and frees them to examine the transgressive components of religious discourse. This encourages the researcher to “provide an avenue—an orientation—
toward a postmodern conception of the relationship between discourse and power” (p. 109) and to question how a text transposes a larger discourse and becomes influential (McGee, 1990). Critical rhetoric examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercises in a relativized world.

Alongside asking questions of domination and freedom, taking a critical rhetorical approach to research allows the researcher to engage with feminist rhetorical methods focusing on asking questions of intersecting layers. Therefore, the critical researcher must induce radical processes and offer possibilities for social change (Biesecker, 1992; Chávez, 2015; Glenn, 2018). As scholars of purity discourse have issued (Natarajan et al., 2022; Moslener, 2022; Ramler, 2022; Schultz, 2021), purity needs to be continuously examined from an intersectional feminist approach that implicates questions of race, gender, sexuality, and the body. By employing a critical feminist lens, I use a critical theoretical lens that encourages me to wrestle with how purity discourse situates its relationship to bodies and social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. Since white women are often the representative of post-purity narratives (Moslener, 2022), my critical feminist position must investigate how white women’s stories carry purity and what it means for white womanhood to be the objective and dominant reality of purity culture teachings.

Additionally, feminist rhetorical scholarship requires the critic to examine the "ethical relationship between researcher and research subject and the ethics of researching an Other, of listening to and then telling, retelling, or analyzing an Other's story, experiences, life” (Glenn, 2018, p. 100). Both Biesecker (1992) and Chávez (2015) argue that scholars must reconstruct rhetorical structures instead of merely adding (or including) "diverse" voices to counterbalance the normative voice. As I work with data-as-text in its myriad forms (participants’ stories,
diaries, and published memoirs), I endeavor to challenge whose story is being told, why such story is presented in such a manner, and what each story provokes in me, as the critic. Instead of searching for ExVangelical texts that fit certain categories of identity, I open myself up to the wider ExVangelical movement and challenge my analysis regarding concepts of purity, impurity, race, gender, sexuality, and the body. Thus, I am conscious of not recycling a binary concept of gender (Butler, 1990b; Mack et al., 2018), I assess sites of heteronormativity (Morris, 2015a; 2015b), I thoroughly examine texts in which whiteness is centered and made strategically invisible (McCann, 2015; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) and as I explore how purity culture objectifies the body, I actively de-objectify the body in my findings and reflections (Moreland, 2019). Along with being aware of this methodological need, conducting critical rhetoric research allows the researcher to examine a phenomenon as it takes shape in a discursive context.

The tricky nature of critical rhetoric is how the text within a discourse is often recounted as seemingly mundane. Therefore, by paying attention to the representation and performance of everyday data (the rhetorical text), the researcher strengthens their writing of participants' voices and provides multiple layers of understanding. This is vital as the critical rhetorical researcher—like the qualitative researcher—must practice self-reflexivity and be open to shifting as discourses contextually shift and develop (McKerrow, 2015). Like rhetorical work, mixed methods are evolutionary. In their evolving state, discussion needs to keep taking place and must stay open. Mixed method scholars utilizing qualitative data can learn from critical rhetorical methods by moving beyond simple definitions of qualitative coding, remembering that coding is a process and that the data should be treated as data needing critical engagement (Howard, 2014; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).
2.2.3 Critical Qualitative Inquiry (CQI)

Marrying both qualitative and critical rhetorical methods allows me to situate my data as both verbal and textual, exercise reflexivity, participate ethically, and represent lived voices trying to tell their story. Therefore, I employ a mixed CQI. Beyond the utilization of both critical rhetoric and qualitative methodologies, CQI centers on the concept of inquiry. Since I approach participants as living data, I refrain from seeing myself as merely plugging in theory and conducting a research project, but rather, I allow participants to be their own theory creators (Lechuga, 2020) and I follow St. Pierre’s prioritization of inquiry as it displays scholarly investigations as relationally developing between the researcher and the participants (Guttorm et al., 2015). In doing so, I approach data as members of a community by which I am curious as to how their counter-identity aids in their excavating and encountering purity and how they discursively construct belonging through rhetorics of place, space, and identification.

In its very nature, Janesick (1994) argues, CQI is a practice of “interdisciplinary triangulation” that examines the data, investigator, and theory. In this inquiry I remain open to the data and how the participants guide my exploration based on the narratives they tell and ways by which they share their testimonies. By using CQI, I conduct my inquiry with three goals: I complicate voice; am open to the data; and unmask the complexities of the data. With the ExVangelical voice operating from a liminal and confrontational identity, their counter voices must be examined as non-homogenous and therefore, complicated. Additionally, exploring post-purity stories will include experiences of religious trauma. Slade et al. (2023) argue that as much as one in five U.S. adults experience religious trauma symptoms. This study, with undertones of religious trauma, requires me to complicate voice by examining the participants' stories as narratives of trauma and recovery that offer connections, new perspectives, and “stimulate the
development of empathy, self-awareness or social reflection” (Leavy, 2015, p. 39)—especially as data may be presented as messy and transgressive.

Following the call of scholars who have examined religious purity discourse (Houser, 2021; Mannon, 2019; Moslener, 2015; 2022; Ramler, 2022), I utilize CQI to complicate discursive notions of gender, race, and sexuality within purity. By doing so, I approach ExVangelicalism’s excavation and encountering of purity and impurity through an intersectional lens. As a critical scholar, it is paramount that I approach my data with the perspective that gender is not a demographic inquiry-based question. Butler (1990a) argues scholars considering questions of gender must embrace gender complexities. They write of contradictions within ideas of gender as being better than assumed unity, especially as gender is performed and constituted through bodily acts and is second to the physical body’s place (Butler, 1990b). Therefore, we see how gender is complicated through voices in the field. Conceptualizations of gender often require individuals to navigate gendered argumentation (Campbell, 1998; Dow & Tonn, 1993). However, as I approach the gendered rhetorics within purity discourse with Butler’s work in mind, I orient my inquiry to consider the contradictory and performed nature of gender.

By complicating voice, I complicate gender by examining the navigation required for non-white and non-male-presenting ExVangelical voices and how ExVangelical rhetoric of personal narratives for a larger white, cis-gendered, straight, women-presenting audience might continue to silence the living trauma of post-purity culture and other post-Christian individual experiences. Additionally, I complicate narratives that work to silence impure sexualities and use white womanhood as a dominant structure of purity. As previously argued, purity discourse situates categories of appropriate sexuality and unsafe sexualities and heavily focuses on white women’s bodies. The all-encompassing category of “pure” and public sexuality is represented as
heterosexually performed, white-centric (or racially invisible), cis-gendered, and able-bodied sexuality. Any other identification outside of this “pure” category exists as bound by “impurity” and requires tricky navigation.

Therefore, purity discourse’s silencing of sexualities is not pertinent to only the silencing of non-heterosexual identities and bodies but also bodies of color, bodies with disabilities, non-binary bodies, and transgender bodies. Mack et al. (2018) write, "The imposition of dichotomous gender is an ongoing and violent process of categorization and dehumanization that works in tandem with racialization and heterosexualization to marginalize subjects" (pgs. 97-98). This silencing of impure sexualities works in an uninterrogated way as it deals with intersecting rhetorical experiences with race, gender, and sexuality. In the examination of racial rhetorics, Nakayama and Krizek (1995), write that whiteness often “elude[s] analysis yet exert[s] influence over everyday life” (p. 293). Alongside Warren, (2003), they argue whiteness is a spatial relation and is embedded in our identities. Therefore, it is vital to "map these spaces" (p. 305). In my examination of ExVangelical stories of excavation and encountering purity rhetorics to create a rhetoric of impurities, heterosexualization and whiteness are also complicated through my inquiry.

Alongside complicating participants’ voices which present themselves as messy, transgressive, and representational of gender, race, and sexuality, I remain open to the data. This requires me to approach the data in two distinctive ways. First, I acknowledge my proxemics to the data community itself. Doing so will allow for a more purposeful methodological marriage of critical and qualitative methods. Hendrix’s (2011) use of Collins’ (1991) “outsider-within” concept through her autoethnographic metaphor of seasonal growth displays this marriage of critical interpretive work which asks both the reader and the researcher to open themselves up to
the data and its development. Following Collins and Hendrix’s work, we understand that a
culture will manage its own experiences—whether it is the object of research or not. Being an
outsider placed within this counter-religious community through the act of my research
encourages me to care for data that both works with and against assumptions and acknowledges
both the participants’ and my management of our mutual and different experiences. From this
position, not only am I a part of the data, but my dynamic role allows me to move both within
and without cultural constraints—thus, being recognizant of my own fluidity. CQI scholars must
visualize themselves as vital to caring for data as their role as both qualitative researcher and
rhetorical critic is to be a “steward of people’s lived experiences” (Roger et al., 2018, p. 541). By
being open to the data, I consider the symbolic nature of the data. In taking this approach, I open
up to what the data rhetorically implies. This allows me to step away from the need to rationalize
an answer but to question what the data is sensing (MacLure, 2021) as I place my research
questions into dialogue.

Second, I approach the data from an integrated feminist-queer epistemology (Misgav,
2016). I understand myself and the data as nonnormative and therefore, not constrained by the
systemic order of purity categories. Thus, the data must be recognized as what it is and
simultaneously as something evolving in context. In the examination of queer rhetorics, Morris
(2007) argues that the epideictic value of queer identities is from their simultaneous
identification and disidentification. Examining identities from a queer lens allows the critic to
disrupt the silencing of nonnormative sexualities (McCann, 2014), undermine heteronormative
articulations, and queer the methods, objects, and theories used within rhetorical studies. In
doing so, the critic offers themselves as a participant in queer worldmaking (Morris, 2015b) and
curates a queer public instead of resituating queer lives within private spheres (Warner, 2005).
From a gender- and sexuality-minded feminist approach, my work should “threaten new hierarchies and exclusions” (Jarratt, 2000, p. 392). This allows me to engage in ongoing and developing discussions of gender and sexuality instead of remaining tied to understanding sexuality within the same categories of purity discourse. Sexuality and queerness can be what it is. It must be written and seen as surpassing strict categories orchestrated by heteronormativity and queer sex panics often orchestrated through evangelical national panics (Lempinen, 2022; Moslener, 2015; 2022).

In an effort to complicate voice and be open to the data uncovered, I endeavor to unmask the complexities of the data. Poth (2018) argues that mixed methods need a "complexity-sensitive" approach that equips researchers to respond to the unique and complex nature of data collected through mixed methods work (p. 5). By adopting a "complexity lens" to help form new connections and learn from dilemmas experienced, mixed method scholars can achieve adaptability to their unique study. Thomas (2021) urges CQI scholars to make sure their methods are accessible so that they may present their research to varied audiences. The researcher’s role is to make sense of the data and present it in a way that offers interpretive value and critical insight into the complexities of lived experiences and texts.

By using CQI to unmask the complexities of the data, I represent this data through the understanding of the data’s history, the data as a rhetorical act, the data as telling stories of embodiment/disembodiment, and utilizing a critical theoretical lens. Rhetoric allows us to examine a phenomenological text through a historical lens and purity discourse, as previously mentioned, has an important history that needs to be considered (Moslener, 2015; 2022). Not only is the data currently impactful in multilayered ways, but the data must be understood historically as I respond to ways by which the data continues to spout ideas. Baskerville (1977)
argues that while a critic examines the poetic and rhetoric, their attention to its history is vital to judging discourse.

Beyond the complexities of data being understood through its historical context, complex data must be understood as part of a rhetorical act. Since ExVangelical data consists of individuals’ stories of self-recognition being amplified through the current ExVangelical movement, ExVangelicals exist within a discursively constituted history (Charland, 1987). Within this rhetorical act, Charland argues that there is a period of interpellation in which the subject enters into the rhetorical situation and recognizes and acknowledges this happening. Therefore, interpellated subjects participate in the discourse that addresses them. Additionally, by understanding the complexity of data, I explore how participants experience both embodiment and disembodiment. Purity discourse situates individuals to be disembodied from impurities (Moslener, 2022), whilst counter-religious individuals retrace this disembodiment in hopes of embracing the embodiment of impurities. Therefore, ExVangelical stories may communicate contextualized feelings of both embodiment and disembodiment in an effort to excavate and encounter purity hauntings.

Finally, I approach this complex data using rhetorical theories as a lens of curiosity. Since I remain concerned with how the participants theorize their own experiences (Lechuga, 2020), I utilize rhetorics of excavation and encounter to better understand purity discourse and rhetorics of place, space, and identification to better grasp the construction of ExVangelical post-purity belonging. In essence, CQI allows me to triangulate the complication of voice, remaining open to the data, and working to unmask the complexities of the data to investigate multilayered testimonies of ExVangelical liminality.
2.3 Case Study Methods

Since qualitative researchers have historically valued voice as it is assumed to be the voice of truth, consciousness, and experiences (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009; Thomas, 2021) and critical rhetorical scholars must problematize whose voices are often passed over (Chávez, 2015), my inquiry centers voices sharing stories of counter-religiosity. Hence, I explore non-normative religiosities as ExVangelicals respond to purity discourse that is largely normalized. I examine the sharing of testimony in three distinct manners: interviews, memoir analyses, and participant diaries.

Since my first research question centers on the phenomenon of the “ExVangelical” label being used as a rhetorical tool to navigate post-purity experiences and purity consciousness, I use the first case study entailing interviews to make sure the rhetorical purpose of the label is understood through the language of ExVangelicals themselves. On top of the first research question about the rhetorical nature of the label, I also ask how ExVangelicals use the roles of place, space, and identification to formulate identity within the liminality of ExVangelicalism. Since themes of place, space, and identification can be illustrated through storytelling (hooks, 2009; Powell, 2007), the usage of interviews, memoirs, and diaries allow ExVangelicals—in varying stages of their identity—to express their counter-religiosity and the liminal nature of such endeavors. Each case study uses data from qualitative interviews as a foundation. Hence, each case study centers on ExVangelical voices while building off of each other to layer in other forms of ExVangelical storytelling.

As Reinharz (1998) argues, the liminality of identity requires methodological tracing. Therefore, I formulate my inquiry to use participant voices throughout while adding published memoirs and participant diaries as supplementary forms of data offering divergent insight. By
adding published memoirs to qualitative interviews, I examine how storytelling through a situated and manufactured text impresses upon the everyday experiences of ExVangelical identity-making and purity excavating and encountering. With my analysis of both interview data and memoirs, I examine how storytelling is integral to both the ExVangelical identity and post-purity navigations as constructed and sellable texts. I use my analysis of memoirs to further my investigation into how ExVangelical stories center whiteness, abled bodies, and heteronormativity—thus allowing me to investigate the objectification purity rhetorics place on white, abled-bodied heterosexuality. In the third case study, I return to data that is not manufactured or sold for an audience by examining participants’ written stories. From my third research question, I explore how ExVangelical navigations of excavating and encountering purity lead to a rhetoric of impurities. I engage with both interviews and the participants’ diaries as they map their experiences with purity in their post-evangelical identity and offer us an applicable takeaway from this purity inquiry. Through the triangulation of interviews, memoirs, and diaries spread throughout three case studies, I rely on participant voices. From this methodological tracing, I trace this liminal identity as possibilities associated with a rhetoric of impurity may also be liminal, requiring an ongoing necessity for excavating and encountering.

Therefore, the various data sets are treated as nuanced data in need of diverse questions and thorough descriptions. From a CQI perspective, description is not separate from evaluation (Gill, 2000). Therefore, I employ transcription work, skeptical reading, coding, and analysis to critically engage with how ExVangelicals use their identity to excavate and encounter purity and to create belonging. While I epistemologically remain an “outsider” to the participants’ experiences, I engage with Naples's (1998) argument that a researcher’s “outsiderness” and “insiderness” are not fixed attributes and can be understood as fluid. Because of this, my own
ever-shifting involvement with this socio-religious community can be negotiated through the interactions I have—as researcher—with the participants. This will require me to be sensitive to the religious contexts and language choices of my participants and to inquire more in an effort to ascertain that I fully understand their perspectives.

Following my critical rhetoric call and the fluidity of my outsiderness, I engage with questions of embodiment during data analysis, writing my findings, and preparing this work for a wider audience. Not only does this require me to epistemologically engage with the steps in this inquiry and practice a reflexive stance, but I recognize that doing this research places me in an embodied stance (Thanem & Knights, 2019). According to Ellingson (2017), my choices as to how I organize and handle data matter. Throughout the inquiry, I write of my embodiment during the research process as bodies are political and cannot be separated from identity (Ellingson, 2017) and must be studied holistically and in an intersectional fashion (Moreland, 2019).

To do so, I follow Ellingson and Sotirin (2020) and utilize fieldnotes, recordings, and transcripts to help visualize the data as being actively made by the participants and not found by me, the researcher, even as I stylize the layout of these findings. Through the use of fieldnotes, I chart how I critically engage with the dynamic data collected on-ground after participant interviews, post-textual readings, and throughout the analysis and writing phases. Through the use of recordings, the relationship between myself and the participant is heard and co-existences of the data collection can be understood as complex. Through the use of transcripts, I visualize what is often said, but not seen. The transcripts consist of spoken words by participants from one-on-one interviews, the published manuscripts praised as leading ExVangelical stories, and the intimate wonderings of participant hand-written diaries. By bringing into question the
methods I aim to implement through my embodied role as the researcher, I bring myself into the field and engage with the participants as they share their stories. From my fieldwork notes, I reflect on my researcher self (Reinharz, 1998). Ultimately, this mixed method, operating from a queer feminist epistemology allows me to thread my voice throughout the project and honor the participants' stories of religious liminality whilst critically engaging with questions of gender, race, body, and sexuality.

Since the phenomenon of an ExVangelical identity is a liminal and multilayered prospect, my mixed methodological stance triangulates text, data, and researcher role to sift through the myriad of testimonies. Therefore, I conduct my CQI through three different case studies. By utilizing case studies, I interact and organize the data as not a fixed case displaying a singular understanding, rather, I use each case study to present contextualized realities. Schwandt and Gates (2018) urge scholars to provide “context-sensitive research that unearths situated meanings in complex social settings and thereby contributes to the body of knowledge indispensable to our capacity to interpret and navigate the social world” (p. 354). Through case studies representing mixed methodological approaches and careful methodological tracing, I respond to the contextual and personal experiences embodied within the data. Each case requires me—the critical researcher—to approach and interact with the data differently, each dataset to be recognized in its unique provision, and each participant as uniquely constructing theories of post-purity belonging. While each case study interacts with varied data, I utilize a mixed method discourse analysis (Gill, 2000; Neumann, 2008). In doing so, I utilize Gill’s (2000) four components of discourse analysis. First, I interact with the different data with concern for the discourse. Second, I understand that language is constructive and constructed. Third, I posit discourse as a form of action being employed by the participants. Fourth, I treat discourse as
rhetorically organized. As I employ critical discourse analysis in the varied cases, I explore the nuance inherent in the data texts to move beyond established categories of knowledge. This is practiced through transcription work (making visible what we hear), queer reading (representing nonnormativities), coding (creating categories of interest), and analyzing discourse (how things are said). In the following section, I present the particular methods conducted in each case study as each case displays the discursive functioning and construction of the counter-religious ExVangelical identity, purity discourse, and a lens into how excavation and encountering purity is socially vital to our understanding of liminal identity communication.

2.3.1 Case Study One: Qualitative Interviews

As stated previously, the methods employed in the first case study use data derived from qualitative interviews with self-identifying ExVangelicals to engage with the first research question posed. My use of interviews with participants for case study one allows me to center my vocabulary on the participants’ narratives. While qualitative interview data is used throughout the three case studies, the first case study focuses solely on participants’ conversations with me and creates a foundation from which I methodologically work in the following case studies.

As a foundational part of my inquiry, I investigate ExVangelical voices. Not only do I implement interviews to locate voice, but I ask whose voice is most shared and what constitutes voices deemed appropriate (pure) and inappropriate (impure). Following Jackson & Mazzei (2009), I aim to examine the voices that are often skipped over for their messy nature. Therefore, qualitative face-to-face interviews are an important first methodological step to locating such voices. Additionally, the first case study is designed so that I may focus on participants’ interviews but use their voices to expand on the second and third case studies, allowing my participants’ voices to carry this inquiry.
By conducting interviews, I center the voices of the participants themselves. Through my facilitation of a conversation, the participants' own words, construction of meaning, and organization of thought become the data and content by which I analyze. Since the participants’ stories are shared with me and I play the role of intentional listener, I argue their narratives serve as “raw material” (Krog, 2018) that co-produce the text of “ExVangelicalism.” With this face-to-face position, I continuously interrogate my epistemology and remind myself of my researcher role. In the act of collecting and caring for the qualitative data throughout the case studies, I am reminded that both epistemology and standpoint matter. Lincoln & Denzin (2018) argue that epistemology and standpoint “—one philosophical, one embodied and sociocultural—gives meaning and inflection to both the beginning (the research question) and the ending (the findings) of any inquiry” (p. 925). With these goals are met, I strategically map my methodological measures involved in each case study, starting in case study one.

Participants

After receiving approval from the University of Memphis Institutional Review Board (See Appendix E), I conducted interviews with individuals responding to my social media posting (see Appendix A) and snowball sampling. Potential participants were asked to take part in a face-to-face interview (either in-person or virtual) if they are (a) at least 18 years of age (b) and identify as an “ExVangelical” or part of the “ExVangelical Movement.” Nineteen participants scheduled interviews. One of these participants disclosed during their interview that they did not use the “ExVangelical” label and were subsequently removed from the sample of participants analyzed in this study. Therefore, there is a total of 18 participants whose interviews are analyzed. During the first stages of each interview, I asked participants how they identify regarding age range (18-25; 26-38; 39-60; 61+) gender, race, and sexuality.
Of the 18 participants, three were 18-25 years of age, 12 were 26-38 years of age, and three were 39-60 years of age. A majority of the participants \((n = 15)\) identified as women, while two participants identified as men and one participant identified as genderqueer. Half of the participants \((n = 9)\) identified as heterosexual, while the other half \((n = 9)\) identified as queer. From the nine participants who identified as queer, three identified as bisexual, another three identified as pansexual, two participants identified as lesbian, and one participant identified as demisexual-lesbian. It is important to note, a majority of the participants \((n = 15)\) identified as white cis-gendered women. Two of the participants identified as white cis-gendered men. One of these men identified as pansexual and the other identified as heterosexual. Half of the participants identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community while the other half identified as cis-gendered and heterosexual. All 18 participants identified as white.

**Procedures**

To facilitate the interview and prompt participants to help construct the data, I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) with the 18 individuals who identified as “ExVangelical.” The questions ranged from the purpose behind the “ExVangelical” label, how the participants constructed it to fit their experiences, who their audience is, and their relationship to other ExVangelicals (both people and texts). I also asked how they came to this counter-religious space and what they want others to understand from their label and movement. With these questions, I engaged in conversations, whether through Zoom video conferencing or face-to-face in public settings, in which ExVangelicals felt free to express their identity purposes, experiences, and how they construct belonging. Specifically, I asked the participants for turning points in their identity construction and liminal frustrations. These interviews provided rich and thorough data that helps us engage with questions regarding how
ExVangelicals excavate and encounter their religious hauntings and provide insight into the web of purity discourse.

**Data Analysis**

Participants were promised confidentiality at the beginning of the interview process, were walked through the consent form (See Appendix C), and were assured that no identifying information aside from their chosen pseudonym, race, gender, and/or sexuality would appear in any publication or presentation. At the end of each interview, I provided the participant with resources regarding religious/religious purity trauma. These included Divorcing Religion’s religious trauma syndrome resources page (Divorcing Religion, n.d.), Dr. Camden Morgante’s purity culture recovery coaching resources page (Morgante, 2021), and the Center for Trauma Resolution and Recovery’s recommended resources page (Center for Trauma Resolution and Recovery, n.d.). These sites provided resources for participants to use in the post-interview process if the interview brought up discomfort or ongoing questions.

After transcribing all 18 interviews, I conducted a thematic discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Burman & Parker, 1993). Since I understand each interview as part of a discourse where an agenda is present (Singer & Hunter, 1999), I use this analytic method as thematic discourse analysis examines both similarities and inconsistencies weaved through varying narratives. Through this thematic discourse analysis, I coded for layered themes that both support, yet provide tension between interviewee experiences. I conducted this step-by-step analysis process through the implantation of four main steps. First, I read through the transcripts-as-discourse while listening to the audio recording of each interview. This allowed me, as researcher, to practice self-reflexivity as I collected my initial thoughts, ideas, and impressions and reflected within the margins of the transcripts. Second, I performed the analysis by coding
the transcripts for similarities and dissimilarities. Therefore, I created a categorization process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that allowed me to visualize how the discursive themes capture importance and how each theme plays a distinct role in the three case studies. I repeated this process until I reached self-acknowledged saturation. Third, I conducted a second round of analysis based on my established thematic coding scheme. During this phase, I located utterances that reflect rhetorics of ExVangelicalism, purity, excavating, encountering, place, space, and identification. In the fourth phase, I continued practicing reflexivity by conducting member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After my themes were categorized and the data began to be coded through the themes, I contacted each participant asking if they were willing and able to partake in a validity check. Using St. Pierre’s (1999) validity check questions I asked if my research statements seem true to their experiences; If not, what is missing or inaccurate; if I exposed anyone’s identity; and if it seems that I have been fair to the participant. Out of 18, 12 participants volunteered and provided feedback on my categorization process and coded themes. This step allowed me to reach just under 67% validity and further strengthen my relationship with the data. Since participant data represents a religious label that has experiences of devout criticism and often masked liminality, I used the validity member check phone calls to thoroughly explain my coding process, language, and research positionality for each participant to make sure my work reflects their experiences and translates their data accurately. From the validity checks, I freely use the data to help us understand the rhetorical contexts surrounding ExVangelicalism, purity discourse, and what ExVangelicalism tells us about purity and a rhetoric of impurities.

This critical discourse analysis of interview data is the first case example of my employing CQI. Additionally, the data provided by the interviewees is woven throughout the
second and third case study making the validity of my CQI analysis vital and needlingly transparent. Not only do I situate the data as both verbal and textual, but I aim to exercise reflexivity, participate ethically, and ultimately represent lived voices trying to tell their story. Following Tracy’s (2010) argument that qualitative research provides a unique path toward rhetorical work as it requires heavy thinking of the researcher’s position and purpose, I position this case study first and follow it with my second case study that folds in critical rhetoric.

2.3.2 Case Study Two: Qualitative Interviews and Memoirs

In addition to qualitative interviews, I posit that from a CQI perspective, critical rhetoric allows me to interrogate my role as critic as I analyze the rhetorical formations of identity and belonging in both qualitative interview data alongside famous ExVangelical texts. There are two distinctive reasons for this dualistic methodological case study. First, ExVangelical data is complex and hardly monolithic, thus requiring multiple ways of engaging with its data. From mcclellan’s (2008) examination into how Portland, Oregon’s Pioneer Courthouse Square is communicatively constructed as meaningful, we see how the researcher using both qualitative data and critical rhetoric is vital to addressing the multiple layers involved with their multilayered research questions. Through mcclellan’s use of qualitative data collection and rhetorical analysis, they visualize their data as ever-changing and complex, not needing to be investigated through one singular method. Hence, this example displays how a “text” reflects active channels of communication that qualitative data seeks to understand, yet rhetorical theories ask the researcher to examine everyday rhetorical praxis.

Second, the overt representation of whiteness in ExVangelical stories—both from the 18 white participants and the three memories written by white women—requires a critical lens into both spoken and textualized data. Similar to other scholarship examining purity teachings (Fahs,
purity narratives continue to center whiteness (Moslener, 2022; Natarajan, et al., 2022; Schultz, 2021). With purity discourse continuously focusing on and using white, heterosexual, thin, and able-bodied, cis-gendered women (Anderson, 2015), the need to interrogate the strategic whiteness and heteronormativity built into the performances of purity is vital (Warren, 2003). As a white cis-gendered scholar, to critically engage with this particular sample size of what, in actuality, is a diverse and non-homogenous group of individuals impacted by American evangelical purity discourse (Anderson, 2015, Moslener, 2022, Natarajan, et al., 2022), I follow Morris (2015a), McCann (2014) and Nakayama and Krizek’s (1995) theoretical positions. When coding the interviews and analyzing the memoirs, I practice both critical self-portraiture and liminal understanding. Doing so allows me to engage with the “challenging and rare practice of contextualizing [my]self and speaking [my]self as part of the critical act” (Morris, 2015a, p. 232). Critically engaging with the text from an integrated feminist-queer epistemology (Misgav, 2016) and providing an oppositional reading of the data (McCann, 2014) allows me to critically interpret the data and analytically shape it to disturb preconceived ideas of purity and systemic purity categories, thus allowing the data to exist in its state of liminality.

Additionally, since this particular sample of ExVangelicals identifies as white subjects to the post-purity consciousness, I take this as an opportunity to investigate what Nakayama and Krizek (1995) call “the discursive space of ‘white’” (p. 291) as whiteness is often performed as an unlabeled and strategically invisible identity and relational order (McCann, 2015; Nakayama & Krizek; Warren, 2003). Therefore, when engaging with participants, their stories, and ExVangelical memoirs, I acknowledge their counter-religious identity as both a rhetorical tool and as intimately tied to their body (Ellingson, 2017) and I disrupt the often-silent role of
whiteness in purity and potential post-purity rhetoric leading to the possibility of a rhetoric of impurities.

By folding in textual analysis to the already established qualitative interview text, I continue to critically step into ExVangelical spaces and draw meaning from both their published and unpublished words. In doing so, I implement a feminist tactic for reading and interpretation. In my drawing from my epistemological standpoint, I interpret identity formations whilst remaining critical and analytical of these contextual texts (King, 1999; Misgav, 2016). From this standpoint, I open myself up to surprising and imaginative interpretations of the data whilst remaining critically inquisitive of how purity discourse situates gender, race, bodies, and sexuality. To do so, I participate in the rhetorical analytic task of queering religious texts (Cruz, 2019). In previous work in which I implemented this analytical method, the nuance involved with post-religious stories was able to be re-presented telling a purposeful deconstruction/reconstruction tale that defied normative religious systemic narratives.

Beyond my own practice, other scholars have utilized this method to honor intersectional religious identities. Wilcox’s (2018) queer analysis of Catholic and Mennonite nun activism allows us to reorient our understanding of religious Sisterhood as these religious activists’ queer ideas of the secular/Sacred dichotomy by arguing that the opposite of secular is not sacred, but rather, the opposite of secular is sisterhood. Instead of urging Christians to be wary of secular culture in the shape of non-Christian culture, their performances urge Christians to be wary of a non-community-oriented secular culture that fails to offer healthcare support and outreach. Similarly, Yip (2005) analyzes studies interpreting queer Muslim and Christian strategies involved with creating affirming hermeneutics. From their analysis, Yip reminds scholars
examining religious identities that they must account for both the religious spaces and socio-cultural contexts the data is seeped within.

By examining religious texts through a queer lens, the critic re-presents the rhetor as an embodied text existing simultaneously in religious spaces and places whilst also formulating a non-hegemonic identity that resists normative religious doctrines. Greenough (2017) argues that critically exploring faith-based constructs with a queer lens allows the critic to investigate how religion remains a living phenomenon—consisting of tensions between normative and non-normative religious experiences. By queering multiple types of religious texts, I explore non-normative narratives that challenge perceptions of what constitutes a religious narrative—whether it is in support or counter to religious systems.

In my second case study, I queer two specific types of ExVangelical texts. In addition to the interview data, I analyze published memoirs that have been heralded as storied insights into the ExVangelical plight. These memoirs act as fragmented texts that are created for a fragmented audience (Smith & Lybarger, 1996). From my critical rhetorical analysis of these memoirs, I provide complex readings of American evangelicalism and the ExVangelical movement as they both revolve around questions of purity discourse. The three memoirs, all written by individuals who identify as ExVangelical, trace their rhetorical excavations and encounterings of evangelical purity and their struggles to formulate place and space of belonging. Cameron Dezen Hammon’s *This is My Body: A Memoir of Religious and Romantic Obsession* (2019), Linda Kay Klein’s *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (2019); and Jamie Lee Finch’s self-published *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning With the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity* (2019) are three ExVangelical memoirs often
labeled as being revolutionary texts propelling the ExVangelical movement forward (CBS News, 2022; Onishi, 2019) all the while authored by cis-gendered, white women.

Through my critical analysis of these memoirs alongside participant language, I queer ExVangelical testimonies of purity to further investigate what purity is, how it is constructed, and how one might use their states of liminality to critically disengage with purity boundaries. As critic, I investigate how their stories are constructed to meet a particular audience and motivate a counter-religious movement. From a critical and queer lens, I move beyond the text’s performance and ask how identity is constructed and whose voice is presented in these stories. With the second case study’s methodological purpose, I examine the phenomenon of purity discourse as it takes shape in both discursive and textualized contexts.

2.3.3 Case Study Three: Qualitative Interviews and Participant Diaries

Morse (1991) writes, “Because our subjects are not passive pawns in the research process, they participate because they themselves gain, they feel the benefit to themselves, and they recognize the benefit of our research to others” (pgs. 405-406). As participants in my inquiry, they, and I both acknowledge the ownership they have over their narratives and their choice to participate in the act of sharing their stories with me. While the previous two case studies place me in a critical role where I facilitate the data, I still encourage participants to remember that they have full ownership over their stories. Following Morse, in all case studies, I ask myself—as critical researcher—how I define my interviewees as data producers. In both case studies one and two, I see the texts as participatory, sharing their stories face-to-face with me and as published memoirs. However, Morse encourages CQI scholars to redefine the confidentiality of participants by providing them the possibility to visualize their own narratives in an effort for participants to own their stories.
Following Morse’s encouragement in redefining participant self-access to their narratives and reminding myself that stories give order to meaning and are part of human nature (Fisher, 1984), I implement participant diaries alongside their interview data for my third and final case study (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). Through this method of collecting data, the diaries provide the researcher with intimate insight into the everyday experiences and attitudes of participants. This methodological process has been used in scholarship in which the researcher aims to understand the reflective nature of data. Whether in health communication examining healthcare provider reflections (Webster, 2002), patient reflections (Rancour & Bauer, 2003), or in instructional contexts where the student reflections are examined (Scanlan et al., 2002), participant diaries allow the participant to be both the research observer and informant. With the data being under the participant’s control, they provide the researcher with what Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) call the “view from within” (p. 484). Jones (2000) utilized participant diaries when they conducted their ethnographic study on throat cancer patient experiences. From this method, Jones gained access not only to the patients’ insight into their experiences but was provided a visual diagram of how patients order their thoughts through their language and emotive responses. I argue participant diaries are an appropriate and helpful tool to use when examining tracing of excavating and encountering purity—which, by nature, can be full of trauma.

Ramler (2022) posits that to study responses to purity discourse and purity culture, the scholar must be aware of religious trauma. A result of both chronic abuses and harmful religion, religious trauma is defined by Ramler as the impact of severing one’s connection with one’s previously embedded faith. While this phenomenon is explored in the initial interviews and within the memoirs, utilizing participant diaries allows me to invite participants to write more freely and intimately about how they actively use their identity to excavate and encounter purity.
rhetorics. Not only do I hope to see how purity rhetorics have a wide-reaching and influential role in the evangelical upbringing, but I also hope to understand how an ExVangelical attempts to sift through this web in their counter-religious and self-critical position in situ. To do so, I use participant diaries as a method to collect data that offers the intimate insight ExVangelicals have with post-purity religious trauma.

In past scholarship using participant diaries, diaries have either been used prior to the interview (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977) or in between two set interviews (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). However, I chose to follow Jones’ (2000) ethnographic work. During the interview data collection process, the final question I asked participants was if they would be willing to take part in a second study that involves their personal diary writings (See Appendix B). I emphasized that this portion of data collection allows them to share their current dealings with evangelical purity discourse and their ongoing ExVangelical identity construction.

If they chose to take part in the third case study, I provided them with the second consent form and diary directions PDF (See Appendix D). I walked each of them through the process of the diaries. In the packet emailed to them after their consent and our interview, they were provided a total of eight pages. The first page is where they could sign the second consent form and be given instructions. The following seven pages were dedicated to seven entries of their choosing. I asked them to provide anywhere from one to seven entries within two weeks. I reiterated that this journal is their space and that they have complete control over how they want to journal their thoughts. If they did not know what to write about, I provided a few prompts such as: Feel free to reflect on how you confronted purity, felt impacted or reminded of purity, had to navigate evangelicalism, questions that ran through your mind, and how those impacted your sense of self, etc. Additionally, I reminded participants of the resources provided from the
previous interview so that they had access to them while working through these diary entries. After the first week of their post-interview dairy process, I sent them an email with a reminder that their dairies would be due in a week. Once participants either filled out seven days’ worth of diary entries, or the two weeks passed, I instructed them to email me a copy of their diary PDF. Of the 18 participants interviewed, 14 agreed to and submitted the subsequent participant diaries. Alongside the interview data, I conducted a critical thematic discourse analysis of the dairies. Validity checks for the diaries were combined with the interview data for the 14 participants who participated in both interviews and diaries. By combining both studies’ member checks, I continued to care for participants and remind them that their stories—both in the interview and from their writings—are vital data that provides numerous layers of insight (Spradley, 1979; Tracy, 2010; Ulmer 2017).

When pondering the purpose of having qualitative data, Krog (2018) urges scholars to "find ways in which the marginalized can enter our discourses in their genres and their terms so that we can learn to hear them" (p. 490). By utilizing participant diaries, not only do I—as researcher—benefit by acquiring intimate data, but my participants also become informants. They carry agency as they have control over their story and choose to share their processes in their vocabulary and order. In this sense, I challenge my interpretive methods by practicing thorough reflexivity (Tracy, 2010) and understanding my participants as their phenomenological theorists (Lechuga, 2020). From this intimate position, I explore how the label “ExVangelical” is used as a rhetorical tool to navigate post-purity experiences and purity consciousness. As the third case study, I position this analysis to help us understand how a rhetoric of impurities can be created through the excavation and encountering of purity.
To place these research questions into conversation with one another, I first need to understand certain terms from firsthand perspectives. Thus, through these case studies, each given its own chapter in this dissertation, I explore the complexity of identity, purity, and post-religious experiences. From qualitative interviews, I coded the data within three distinct categories: ExVangelicalism, purity discourse, and what ExVangelicalism tells us about the rhetorics of purity and impurities. These three major coding themes allow me to organize the role of each case study. Case study one, with its focus on the rhetorical strategic purpose of ExVangelicalism, is informed solely by interview data with ExVangelicals. Case study two, focusing on the cultural constructions of purity discourse, brings in memoirs to add to the interview data so that we may interrogate manufactured stories of whiteness, abled bodies, and heterosexuality. In the third and final case study, participant diaries are added to interview data so that we may understand the trickiness inherent in deconstructing purity and working towards a rhetoric of impurities. The marriage of interview and diary provides a contextual lens into the continuous work of leaving evangelical purity discourse.

My methodological practice of CQI is employed throughout the three case studies. While all three cases examine ExVangelical testimony and post-purity experiences, each case positions my role in a unique position. In each case study, I act as a present and interactive facilitator of participant stories-as-text. I guide them through the data collection process and establish rapport (Spradley, 1979). I actively listen to their stories and provide them the opportunity to verbally process their identity. In the second case study, I step into a more critical role and ask deeper questions of established texts. These texts, while stories, are manufactured for an audience and I aim to investigate the ways by which these texts are presented to a reader to provide insight into a growing movement. In the final case study, I return to personal narratives and ask participants
to write intimately about their experiences so that I understand the day-to-day processes involved with post-purity navigation. Through the structuring of these case studies, I respond to the fluidity of the text. Approaching each case as it presents the text within a different platform and constructing itself for varying purposes, my analyses—as part of an inquiry—are always developing (Guttorm et al., 2015). This requires me to adapt in both my applied (data collection, coding, and member checks) and rhetorical (critical analysis) work and see methodological work as a process and move beyond platonic constraints (McKerrow, 1989), thus freeing this inquiry from focusing on locating absolutes.

Each case study plays a role in my “rhetorical fieldwork” as they partner qualitative and rhetorical work. Endres et al. (2016) argue this intersection between rhetorical and qualitative inquiry "form[s] a solid foundation from which to explore further intersections, productive tensions, and, most importantly, offerings that can benefit the practices of both rhetorical and qualitative inquiry" (p. 519). Not only does this critical qualitative research impact my study, its audience, and participants, but it also provides ways by which I can use this inquiry to further critical scholarship, everyday understandings, conceptions of performance, bricolage, reflexivity, and pedagogy.

From this intersectional approach, I remain committed to my role as a critical researcher. I refrain from participating in a methodological orthodoxy (Hesse-Biber, 2010), I examine articulations of exclusion and belonging through discourses of alternative norms and practices, and I locate and represent transgressive voices. Additionally, I appreciate my data as both historical and discursive texts (Baskerville, 1977; Black, 2022) that are embodied (Moreland, 2019) within a living community (Morse, 1991) that is continuously developing (Chastain, 2019) and must be demystified (McKerrow, 1989). As this chapter concludes, I transition to the
analysis and critical component of this inquiry. In the following chapters, I present three case
studies in which we explore the ExVangelical movement and the rhetorical functioning of the
ExVangelical label; purity discourse as it codifies white womanhood and xenophobic sexuality;
and finally, what ExVangelicalism reveals about cultivating a rhetoric of impurities. As this
mixed methodological analysis unfolds, it becomes clear my role is not just about asking how
purity rhetorics impact one’s body, but how purity-as-discourse implicates all layers of self and
relationship.
CHAPTER 3

ExVangelicalism: The People, Place, and Purpose of a Post-Purity Movement

“...we didn’t walk away from the church. We’re walking towards something better.”

- “Erica”

As Chastain highlights in their first podcast episode, ExVangelicalism is not a homogenous movement fortified by one type of dissenting post-evangelical (Chastain, 2016). The scholarship laid out in Chapter Two contends that an ExVangelical is not merely someone deciding to leave their singular evangelical church in hopes of locating another church. Rather, an ExVangelical is a post-evangelical figure critiquing the larger religious discourse regarding gender (Natarajan et al., 2022), race (Herrmann, 2021; Moslener, 2022; Shultz, 2021), and purity (Gish, 2018; Houser, 2021). The purposive use of the label signifies a larger and shifting rhetorical movement in which post-evangelicals are actively dissenting and questioning discursive foundations of evangelicalism.

This post-evangelical movement is worth exploring from a critical lens as it displays a group transitioning from evangelical purity and deconstructing notions of what is pure and impure. In order to understand this more fully, I explore the rhetoric of the ExVangelical identity in hopes to comprehend how the ExVangelical movement could provide insight into a post-purity process, ultimately leading to a rhetoric of impurities. To begin, this chapter helps us understand the identity of ExVangelicals, their use of place and space to create belonging, and overall, how ExVangelicalism provides a response to purity discourse through qualitative inquiry. As argued in previous chapters, the rhetorical purpose of identification, place, and space are key to this analysis and are weaved throughout the inquiry as I ponder what constructs ExVangelicalism (as place) and how it differs from evangelicalism (as place).
Additionally, how space and identification are used within the transformative process of evangelical purity to ExVangelical impurities.

From previous scholarship examining the ExVangelical movement and rhetorical components of ExVangelicalism through its usage of media, I investigate dynamics of ExVangelicalism outside of its heavily circulated mediated discourse. While Chapter Four weaves in a critical analysis of published ExVangelical memoirs as an investigative layer, this chapter exempts the memoir-as-text. Instead, I explore ExVangelicalism as an embodied and post-purity movement through a critical lens. Hence, this chapter and first case study relies solely on interviews with participants who self-identify as “ExVangelical.” From the literature, we understand ExVangelicals as individuals divorcing previous American evangelical faith doctrines, using their label to locate other ExVangelicals, and experiencing a distinctive deconstruction and counter-religious process. This ExVangelical movement ultimately tells a story of post-evangelicals not only “leaving” evangelicalism, but actively participating in a post-purity movement. In order to sift through this argument, this chapter is designed to help us understand the rhetorical construction, characteristics, and functioning of the identity label “ExVangelical.”

Through their post-purity identity, the participants rely on storytelling to enact three rhetorical goals: to locate other ExVangelicals, to experience identification, and to problematize purity. In doing so, I argue ExVangelical narratives provide a lens by which to understand how ExVangelicalism creates symbolic place for individuals seeking space in which they can be embodied outside of placed purity. As Blair et al. (2010) and Davis (2022) argue, place is created when space allows for “social transformations [to] occur” (Davis, p. 222). As ExVangelicals leave evangelical place that signifies purity and begin to wrestle with the space provided by their
identity of impurities, they symbolically engage in ExVangelical placemaking. Meaning, ExVangelical discourse provides space for complex and political agency (Smith & Low, 2006) in which ExVangelicalism situates itself as a post-purity identity, “subject,” and “position” (Lefebvre, 1991, pgs. 182-193). Thus, this chapter provides one section of a three-part study in which I use critical feminist methods to examine the rhetorical construction of post-purity identity in order to explore how identification, place, and space are methodologically used within the rhetorical phenomenon of divorcing oneself from purity discourse.

By asking what ExVangelicalism is, I explore the rhetorical construction of ExVangelicalism by asking who ExVangelicals are, how they use strategies of place, space, and identification to formulate their discursive identity, and what accentuates the ExVangelical plight and how they find post-purity consciousness through this counter-religious movement. As previously defined, post-purity commonly refers to the post-evangelical processes of leaving and critiquing evangelicalism (Hermann, 2021) and its weaponization of a purity/impurity binary (Shotwell, 2016). However, the use of the term works rhetorically as to create identity, inclusion, and move beyond the boundaries of evangelical purity doctrine and practices. To explore these questions, I break this specific coding category into three themes: the people, place, and purpose of this post-purity movement.

3.1 Post-Purity People

Due to the liminal and ever-evolving nature of the “ExVangelical” label and movement, this theme was born from a constant questioning process (de Souza, et al., 2016). When exploring the multi-dimensional rhetorical purpose of the label “ExVangelical,” I started by asking who ExVangelicals are, how this label is exercised, the purpose of the label, and why it exists as a counter response to purity discourse. By doing so, I argue ExVangelicals rhetorically
place their identity in four ways: They define place for “ExVangelical/ism,” they disrupt the negative placement of post-evangelicalism, they position ExVangelicalism as a deconstruction of pure place, and they engage with complex space in effort to constitute new place.

3.1.1 Defining Place for “ExVangelical/ism”

Participants used varying language to describe themselves and the purpose behind the label “ExVangelical” or the ExVangelical movement. Aliza joked that the term ExVangelical “says a lot with so little.” The purpose of identifying as an ExVangelical is to organize oneself in an active and critical role, providing a powerful association (Blair et al., 2010) in which the space of post-purity becomes the place of ExVangelicalism. Thea explained the label as being “upfront and direct instead of neutral.” Thea described their identity as an ExVangelical signifying a “loud” dissent from purity instead of a simple “slipping away.” Jenny described it as a self-critical experience where, as an ExVangelical, she is someone who came to “a realization that [I] no longer identify with [evangelical] values and they no longer define [me] or pertain to [me] as they once did.” Brooke and Paige argued that ExVangelicalism represents a group of people that critically recognize issues within the practice of evangelicalism. Aliza stated the meaning the of the label means that she has “personally tested the belief system of the evangelical church” against what she believes spiritually and found that the two “are not the same.”

Along Aliza’s thinking, other participants described the label and movement as being pronounced by individuals’ experiences with religious trauma and the act of unlearning (Downie, 2022). Coined by Winell (2012), “religious trauma syndrome” is the internal consequence of individuals who once subscribed to authoritative religious structures that used theological teachings with a focus on eternal damnation. Following Winell’s work, Stone (2013) defines
religious trauma as “pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences” (p. 324). Along with recognizing the role of religious trauma, the act of unlearning is part of the ExVangelical label and movement. Unlearning allows individuals to partake in what Bauman (2004) frames as an “un-fixed” concept. ExVangelical’s unlearning provides them space to explore an un-fixed religiosity and sift away from previous religious structures and doctrines. When asked how they define an ExVangelical, SG commented that the term is synonymous with “a trauma survivor.” Brooke described the label as one of recognizing “the bad and wanting to reconcile.” Part of the reconciliation process stems from this process of unlearning. Jess went as far as stating that being an ExVangelical is “unlearning behaviors and beliefs that [you] don’t identify with, but that [you’ve] been ingrained with.” She went on to describe it as “learning to think for yourself or challenge [evangelical] beliefs [that] are really detrimental or can be to the mental health of people who grew up in that.”

ExVangelicalism is defined by its liberating factor. This theme is present through various emerging codes from this study, however, when asking who ExVangelicals are, their identity as liberated post-evangelicals is vital to the ExVangelical experience. When asked what the term meant, Caleigh stated “at the very root of it for me, [it] means freedom…the freedom to question.” Anna described the ExVangelical movement as a movement directly opposing evangelicalism’s use of “shame tactics” and “rigid expectations.” She went on further stating, ExVangelicals are “accepting of people who don’t necessarily fit a mold of an evangelical.” Being an ExVangelical could be both someone who identified as a Christian or not. Brom described an ExVangelical as someone who is known to have “literally left the Church” whereas Becky explained that an ExVangelical can be “a type of Christian” but one who chooses not to “associate with wanting to, believing, or having any desire to go and convert people to any way
of life.” In the complexity of post-purity space, ExVangelicals name themselves, and in this new ExVangelical place, they allow post-purity to be a separation from either doctrine or from the physical places upholding doctrine.

The linguistic structure of the moniker “ExVangelical” was also part of how participants represented the locatable label/movement. Becky stated, “just putting the ‘X’ in there to let everyone know that we were evangelical…it [means] we do not identify with that type of religion or flavor of Christianity anymore.” Erica described the “X” as signifying a person “trying to find a new way forward.” Both Elane and Anna likened the “X” to a breakup. Anna described it as like a relational breakup with “a definitive end [in which] something happened to make that disconnection happen, but it’s still part of you and that doesn’t get erased.” Elane said being an ExVangelical is “not saying what you are, it’s saying what you’re not.” The purposive placing of the “X” in the term itself, provides ExVangelicals the ability to name the state of their relationship to evangelicalism on their own terms.

3.1.2 Negative Places for ExVangelical/ism

The second theme from the emerging code was how ExVangelical’s wrestled with their identity alongside internalized negative associations from their time within evangelicalism. Before the term “ExVangelical” became a known term, the concept of an evangelical Christian “leaving” the church connotated a negative choice. The experience of having grown up in an environment being negatively predisposed to the concept of countering one’s religion and then recognizing in their own ExVangelical process that they are the negative post-Christians they were warned about was a powerful theme throughout the participants’ narratives. Before the ExVangelical movement provided a purposive label, Erica described how when she decided to leave her church “there wasn’t an official positive term that was used…and because of the
derogatory terms that I had heard, I was like ‘oh my gosh, we’re awful. We’re so bad.’” Jenny explained how a woman who left their faith was labeled as a woman who wanted to live promiscuously, that they want to “just go out and sin,” however Jenny laughed and followed this by stating she was a mother in her 40s who was deconstructing “and there’s this misunderstanding of that.” Aliza explained how the ExVangelical label will “stir the pot” and that “people use it to make a statement.”

Before the placed “ExVangelical” term, ExVangelicals described several labels used to distinguish an individual leaving evangelical place. Several participants stated that a deconstructing Christian was called a “backslider.” Anna described this term further by explaining that while she did not know what “deconstruction” meant, she knew what backsliding was “because you’re moving back from God.” She described this term through her childhood imagination in which she “always pictured it…as literally moving backwards down the aisle of a church and out the doors and being pulled out by a double figure.” Erica and Becky also explained that backsliding was the term often used to describe the act of deconstructing one’s faith. Becky said that anyone who was accused of backsliding was also labeled a “heathen.” Similarly, Brom said that when he told his family about his ExVangelical label, he described his family viewing him “as a hell-bound sinner…as this demon among them.” He told a story where his brother-in-law told him his identity as an ExVangelical meant he was crafting a faith based on socialism and called him “a hell-bound socialist.” Kiera stated that the label “doubters” was used, and Brooke said that someone who left the faith was called a “doubting Thomas,” which is a play on Apostle Thomas who questioned Jesus’ resurrection and is used to describe a skeptical believer.
However, because of its deconstructing nature, ExVangelicals will be positioned in a negative light. Caleigh argued “if you already have a negative connotation towards deconstruction, then you’re going to have a predisposition, a perception to have a negative outlook on what being an ExVangelical means, whereas it’s not always so simple and black and white.” From the interviews, the participants described their identity as being a consistent contradictory experience. While their definitions reflect a religious system they are critiquing and their reclamation of the label requires them to confront the negative predisposition they carry, ExVangelicals see their label as playing a unique role in their religious deconstruction and offering empowerment and tools for advocacy. Of course, this is worth pondering as we engage how post-purity place presents a nuanced positionality and sense of agency which I explore further in Chapter Six.

3.1.3 ExVangelical/ism as a Deconstruction of Pure Place

The third emerging theme represents how participants describe a unique deconstructive purpose to the ExVangelical movement. Not only is ExVangelicalism a religious deconstruction label, but according to ExVangelicals themselves, it is a unique form of deconstruction that pairs with experiences of empowerment and advocacy within sites of impurities. Brooke described being an ExVangelical is not necessarily removing herself from religion completely but wanting “to evaluate my practices and make sure I’m being safe for myself and safe for others.” Doing so requires a distinctive trait of religious deconstruction. SG stated that “being ExVangelical is unique” as it signifies someone being part of “a movement for the separate[ion], separating yourself from the radicalization of Christianity.” This “radicalization” that SG spoke of was also brought up during Becky’s interview. Becky explained that the deconstruction of an ExVangelical requires the individual to acknowledge the “abuse and trauma that’s happened
under [evangelicalism].” Caleigh explained how she is thankful for the term “ExVangelical” so that she does not have to rely on the term “deconstructing Christian” since “so many people within the evangelical movement have condemned people going through deconstruction.” Emma stated she likes the term since it is internet-friendly “neologism” that is “succinct” and “tells you exactly what it is is…pithy…and good branding overall.” Along these lines, Aliza said that the term sends a clear message about what is being deconstructed. She stated, “It calls out the Church [and] that I am no longer part of [it].”

Beyond its unique branding of deconstruction, the ExVangelical movement offers a communal identity. In doing so, within the space of deconstruction, the ExVangelical identity labels a new place that exists beyond the boundaries of purity. Unlike evangelical place, ExVangelical place does not denote when ExVangelicalism begins, and evangelicalism ends—rather the place of ExVangelicalism is impure as it relies on symbolic identities and transformations. Alison described the ExVangelical community as “a community of people all related to deconstructing.” Evan stated being an ExVangelical is “an eye-opening experience” as he “see[s] people going through something similar that I had gone through.”

The transformations highlighting the place of ExVangelical community is framed uniquely by ExVangelical’s advocacy for specific social issues. Kiera stated that an ExVangelical is someone that has to confront homophobia, systemic racism, and the use of eternal damnation as an evangelical teaching tool. Jess described that an ExVangelical not only acknowledges social issues within evangelicalism, but also “directly opposes,” “challenges” and “makes it a mission to challenge those beliefs.” The association and enactment with social justice signifies an ExVangelical taking root within this new place. From the unique space of deconstructing formal evangelical doctrine within a site of community, ExVangelical/ism becomes a new place.
While it exists somewhat outside of evangelical place, ExVangelical/ism works from evangelicalism to reestablish itself outside of purity.

3.1.4 ExVangelicalism as Both Space and Place

During our interview, Thea described that to be an ExVangelical is “to exit the faith.” The fourth emerging theme when asking who an ExVangelical is, is the concept of ExVangelicalism as both space and place as it is an act of “exit[ing]” evangelical place. While this concept has been recognized already, in the following section, I break this down in effort for us to understand the relationship between space and place as ExVangelicalism creates its own post-purity place. In Barry Lopez’ commentary on American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s writing on space, he argues Tuan positions space as a context in which an individual journeys to after leaving a place in which they have fostered an attachment. This “amorphous space” is then “characterized by a feeling of freedom or adventure, and the unknown.” Tuan goes on to argue that by moving beyond the boundaries of our previously attached places, we make “the foreign comprehensible, or simply more acceptable” (Lopez, 2001, p. 278). A thread weaved throughout the interviews was one that told a story of ExVangelicals’ identity being pronounced through the leaving of place to exist in a space of ExVangelical discourse by which a new ExVangelical place is made.

To do so, ExVangelicals must first move beyond evangelical boundaries to which they were once attached and pursue a foreign concept of free and nuanced space. This act requires ExVangelicals to recall evangelical place and narrate their symbolic exit from purity boundaries (Davis, 2022). Erica stated an ExVangelical is someone who not only has critical concerns with evangelical practices, but actively steps away from “big ‘C’ Church,” both literally and figuratively. From the exiting of an attached place, ExVangelicals then visualize their ExVangelicalism as offering space. Thea described ExVangelicalism as providing them “space to
just live and breathe and be okay.” They argued that their ExVangelical identity is “a state of
being.”

From the spatial freedom provided by leaving evangelical place, ExVangelicalism allows
post-purity individuals to transition to a nebulous place acting as an empowering site (Davis,
2022; hooks, 2009). This nebulous place of ExVangelicalism, with it being untethered to purity
boundaries, allows ExVangelicals to locate one another, define ExVangelicalism for themselves,
and embrace impurities. In doing so, boundaries between purity and impurity are not only
“broken,” but they can be “transgressed” (hooks, p. 55). Emma argued that as an ExVangelical,
she knew she “arrived” when she found “people who were already there” and that
ExVangelicalism is the process of “finding your way to it.” In their approach to foreign spaces
outside of evangelical boundaries, ExVangelicals step away from assumptions and expectations.
Anna explained that through her ExVangelical journey, she learned that it is “stepping away from
the expectations of white colonialism.”

As pilgrims from placed evangelical ideology, ExVangelical’s rhetorical work is defined
by their venture into an unknown space with critical purpose to reconstruct a new place.
ExVangelicals’ label is one of varying definitions—some contradictory, some similar. Their self-
identity awareness is impacted by their predisposed ideas of religious deconstruction, and from
this, they attempt to visualize their identity as one of a unique deconstruction that aims to
empower and advocate. While Becky explains her ExVangelical label is a “catchy, quick, and
easy moniker,” the ExVangelical movement and label utilizes rhetorics of place and space and
has purpose beyond its meaning and who carries the term.
3.2 Post-Purity Place

While the label ExVangelicalism acts as space for deconstructing Christians to formulate their identity, the experience of ExVangelicalism reflects the use of place, space, and identification to further perform their identity within the liminality of impurity. Following literature on place and space (Blair, et al., 2010; Davis, 2022; hooks, 2009; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; mcelellan, 2008), I ask how the dyadic value of place and space both work with and as separate from one another for ExVangelicals to messily formulate their identity and culture of belonging. Similar to Tuan, hooks argues place enacts itself as “a location of possibility” where boundaries can be defied and new places can be enacted to offer insight into varying identities and experiences. When critical of place, hooks (2009) and Massey (1991) remind us place is a process and requires individuals to acknowledge their role in place. I label this coded category, with its two emerging themes, as “the place of post-purity” to understand how countering purity discourse infuses both place and space but requires critical self-acknowledgment.

3.2.1 Conceptual ↔ Personal

The first emerging theme dives into how the individual shifts from conceptual (spatial) religious divorce to personal (placed) religious divorce. The language used to distinguish this theme was influenced from one participants’ interview. Olivia explained how after marrying a man who had also been raised in purity culture, she wanted a divorce after experiencing domestic abuse. She described being confused by the fallout of her marriage since her and her husband at the time followed the “rules” of purity. She stated, “We did all the things. This is not checking out. This is not lining up. And that is when a big breakdown of my faith and my identification with the church and as an evangelical, that’s when it went from conceptual to personal.” From the interviews, participants spoke of turning points in which they recognized aspects of
evangelical purity they wanted to counter and then locating personal reasons to actively counter evangelical purity. During the conceptual stage, participants spoke of starting to recognize feelings of disillusion or personal needs not being met. The turning point from conceptual to personal was in the form of a catalytic event in which the participants could visualize their disillusion and needs, and then act on this recognition, thus placing them in a post-purity process.

From this emerging theme, two meta-themes were formed. First, participants spoke of a conceptual experience of disillusion or unsettlement that allowed them to personally name the issue. SG compared this experience to that of someone going through trauma recovery. She went on to describe how individuals who have experienced trauma “might find power in identifying themselves as a trauma survivor.” Thus, the naming of the unsettling and disillusioning experiences acts as an empowering experience and allows the individual to move from conceptualizing deconstruction to personalizing and enacting their deconstruction. Several of the participants explained that the turning point from conceptual to personal when experiencing disillusionment and naming it was one in which they experienced or saw abuse happen within evangelical places. The concept of religious abuse becomes personal when it transpired in a place in which they, too, took part. Jenny explained that when news regarding church-based abuse nationally began to surface, she spoke up when she saw an abusive situation transpire in her own church. However, she was “very much dismissed and made to feel like I was crazy.” She then realized that “I can’t be involved in an organization that protects and excuses abusive behavior.” Brooke explained how when her previous church announced an investigation into a possible abusive situation and found the lead pastor guilty, he “flipped the script and was like, ‘no, I’m a victim of these people, maligning my character, saying these things about me.’” She described how that Sunday during his victim speech, she recognized him as “the antithesis of what the
Bible describes as a healthy pastor or spiritual leader in a community” and felt the need to step away from the church. Caleigh explained that her turning point from conceptual to personal was when she realized she wanted to publicly come out as queer yet felt that her church at the time would have abusively handled her news. She decided to leave the church saying, “it was not going to be a safe [place] for me once I came out publicly.” Paige explained how her ability to place her disillusion of conceptual abuse personally happened both in her church and at home. She described how, after being sexually harassed by her youth pastor and gaslit by a member of the church who knew of the abuse, she told her mom only to be told, “Don’t tell anyone about this because then people will only ever see you as a victim.” Going back to SG’s comments, the ability to name oneself as having experienced religious abuse allows the individual to personally name and place the conceptual and spatial harm perpetuated within evangelical purity.

Being able to personally name the disillusion with evangelicalism allows ExVangelicals to place conceptions of harm. Aliza explained how her ability to deconstruct her own experiences with trauma has allowed her to view evangelicalism from “my own lenses and my own filters to see God a little more clearly without these filters of pain.” Brom even described how being an ExVangelical has allowed him to place accountability on those who have harmed him. He went on to explain that without deconstructing and divorcing himself from evangelical places, he would have not been able to see himself as a victim of evangelical purity. When explaining this turning point during our interview, Emma used the coding scene from The Matrix in which the green codes appearing on screen represent the unseen virtual reality. She explained how when she was 15, she started to feel unsettled with her dad’s role as a pastor in his church. While at church one Wednesday night, Emma describes seeing “everything in code, and it was just hypocritical people just being dicks to each other, social one-upmanship.” She said she started
crying and asked her mother to take her home. Thea stated, “I felt very unsettled around other evangelicals. And because I was unsettled, it caused me to be curious about why that was.” Thea explained how their ExVangelical practices have allowed them to begin to question the boundaries enforced by evangelicalism.

The second meta-theme spoke to ExVangelicals’ self-acknowledgment of personal wants and needs. This self-acknowledgment allows ExVangelicals to move from the concept of ExVangelicalism to the ability to personally own and perform such a critical identity. Thus, ExVangelicalism becomes more tangible as they move from ExVangelical space (freedom to dissent) to ExVangelical place (actively taking part in a named site). This turning point seemed to be punctuated by the rhetorical act of naming oneself, and through the naming, appreciating, and responding to one’s needs. Caleigh reminded me of this importance when she stated, “just the power of language in general and how identities can be different” is vital to the dynamism of a label such as “ExVangelical.” Both Caleigh and Emma compared their identities as ExVangelicals to their identities as queer women. Caleigh stated,

I would have the personal assumption that most people, if they are to personify any sort of identity, ExVangelical, whatever it is, that they have invested some time into knowing what, or at least most or part of what, that identity means to them and how it does fit in with the bigger picture of their entire identity.

Becky described her conceptual to personal turning point happened when her identity as an ExVangelical gave her room to name mental health concerns in ways she could not within evangelicalism. She explained, “I didn’t have the words to say, ‘oh, I’m having anxiety. I’m experiencing depression.’ I didn’t know what was going I with me. I was just very scared.” From her experiences with mental health concerns, she stated she began to question her faith since she
did not line up with what evangelicalism told her she must feel. Alongside Emma and Caleigh’s acceptance of their sexuality paving way for them to embrace their ExVangelical selves, Becky’s recognition of her mental health needs created room for her to transition from conceptualizing the need for critical deconstruction to actively taking part in the ExVangelical movement in order to counteract the harm perpetuated by evangelical purity discourse.

Olivia summarizes this idea when she stated:

I would say what maybe makes the term ExVangelical different is it's a modern term that carries a lot of weight of personal experience that comes with feeling that there are things in religion, in American Christianity that have been incredibly painful, incredibly unhelpful, incredibly damaging…and [ExVangelicals have] been able to find a community where people find a common label with each other, where they can discuss common revelations and experiences and distance themselves from a place where they took their identity in, typically in the Protestant Evangelical American church.

The identity of an ExVangelical situates itself as one that uses place, space, and identification to practice self-acknowledgement and moves discursively from concepts of critical deconstruction to personalizing the deconstruction process. However, the question of how belonging is rhetorically constructed through rhetorics of place and space remains worth exploring. The following emerging theme displays how place, space, and identification are used as rhetorical tools to create belonging and exist in a space of liminality.

3.2.2 Place, Space, and Identification as ExVangelical Tools

The theme of place, space, and identification is weaved throughout the case studies within this dissertation, however, this emerging theme of these concepts acting as rhetorical tools used especially by ExVangelicals in their counter-religious work manifested itself in the
interview data. As seen in Appendix B, the questions I asked during our interviews did not explicitly request information regarding the use of place, space, and identification. However, participants’ narratives when describing various turning points in their ExVangelical process represented consistent usage of place, space, and identification. Additionally, when conducting member checks with 12 of the 18 participants, I explained the process of this particular code during each member check. Participants emphasized that my analysis regarding the usage and relationship between place, space, and identification made sense and captured their narratives.

When asking how ExVangelicals use concepts of place to locate belonging with an identity label that is, as this research has shown, nuanced, negatively portrayed, and, as Fekete and Knippel (2020) have argued, is housed largely online, I coded the data to see if a relationship between place and space existed for ExVangelicalism. By examining the data for issues of place, we understand how ExVangelicals critically engage with specific, locatable, or paused texts of their ExVangelical identity and post-purity consciousness. Additional to place, when examining the data for issues of space, I explore how ExVangelicals cultivate meaning through their discursive actions. Following Hawhee (2006) and Moreland (2019), space as rhetorical tool was coded through ways by which ExVangelicals use their bodies and voice to engage in post-purity discourse and the liminality of impurities. As stated previously, coding for rhetorics of place allows me to investigate both the physical and non-physical ways of self-acknowledgement and coding for space opens the investigation up to examine how one’s acknowledgment of self is drawn from formulated meaning. When coding for place and space, I located six meta-themes that add insight to the question of how ExVangelicals use place, space, and identification to formulate belonging: Disconnection of place; “outgroup” place; supportive learning places; space as process; space-making from online place; and identification through storytelling.
Disconnection of Place

There are two sides to the process of place for ExVangelicals. First, ExVangelicals’ critical examination of self and religious structure requires them to “leave place.” I call this leaving of place a “disconnection of place” as it resembles a former connection to evangelical places, yet an active disengagement with these places. From their narratives, participants acknowledge their lack of place being constituted by how they feel unsafe, thus equating the absence of safety to the absence of place. During our interview, Jenny described sitting in her previous evangelical church and suddenly considering the floors, walls, and seating within the church and recognizing a lack of “hope” for herself and her family in that church. She stated, “I was not finding any corner that felt safe to me. It all felt unsafe, and self-preservationist and there was no integrity.” Erica described a similar experience where she realized her growing discomfort one day while attending her church’s service and said, “I cannot be here anymore.” Elane described the physical place of Christian churches has “holding a lot of baggage for me.” Becky explained her disconnection of place as her “running as far away from the church [as there are] too many trauma reminders.” Participants used language of effectively leaving evangelical places, such as churches, along with leaving evangelical places, such as relationships.

Many participants described the lack of safety within evangelically placed relationships as a catalyst for disconnecting themselves. Elane stated that she has left relationships and explained, “There are friendships that are so triggering to me that I’ve just kind of let them fall by the wayside because I can’t stand to be around them, or most of what they say.” Brooke described how even leaving her previous church made her recognize the need to leave relationships with former congregants still attending the church. That “even just in the process of
leaving, finding out that people that I trusted and respected having these opinions about me because I left” urged her to recognize the need for disconnection. Paige expressed that she has avoided talking to evangelicals as she finds the evangelical church “not a trustworthy source” for fostering relationships. When asked if she would explain her ExVangelical identity to an evangelical, Anna stated “my initial instinct would be to say, ‘I’m busy and I’m sorry I can’t talk about it’ because anxiety would take over or I would ask them to pause so I could take a Klonopin and have thirty minutes while [it] kicked in.” Having thoroughly disconnected herself from evangelical places—both church and relationships—Caleigh described that relationships she now partakes in allow her “not [to] fear judgment, not [to] fear retaliation, not [to] fear something regulating.” However, she said that locating “safe” people since disconnecting from evangelical place is difficult. She explained, “the idea of a safe person is still something I struggle with because it’s like I was robbed of having safe people [or] what I thought was safe people.”

The concept of disconnecting from evangelical places as an ExVangelical holds two components. First, the disconnection is brought on by recognizing the lack of safety, disconnect, and lack of belonging. Alison explained how as an ExVangelical, “you notice that there’s a disconnect with you and your faith community and there’s something that kind of led to you feeling like you don’t belong anymore, or you don’t agree with the teachings of the church.” Second, the act of disconnecting from place as an ExVangelical requires individuals to set forth in a new direction of possible places. Erica summed this up when she stated, “[ExVangelicals] didn’t walk away from the church. We’re walking towards something better.”
“Outgroup” Place

The “something better” that Erica speaks of highlights the second process to place for ExVangelicals. Once having disconnected from evangelical place, ExVangelicals then create place for other people who have also disconnected from previous places—be it personal faith structures, relationships, churches, or other parachurch communities. This newly created place by and for ExVangelicals provides space for them to locate one another and support each other in the liminality of ExVangelicalism. This meta-theme was named when Thea explained that the ExVangelical movement “provide[s] a place” for post-evangelicals that “feels more comfortable and less unsettling.” They went on to state, ExVangelicalism is “a place where all of the outgroup people ended up meeting.”

The concept of an outgroup place was coded as ExVangelicals acknowledge their newfound comfort after leaving evangelical place and formulating different varieties of post-evangelical places. Elane described feeling “like I am able to experience the love of God more and exhibit the love of God in a way that I never was able to under the construct of evangelicalism” in the current outgroup “place” within she exists. Becky explained how these outgroup places—whether in-person gatherings or online support groups of ExVangelicals—have allowed her to accept her counter religious identity. She described feeling “less hidden and less marginalized because there are other people who missed out on it too.” In these outgroup places, fellow ExVangelicals connect on the similar experiences of needed disconnection of place. Becky argued there is not support for the ExVangelical process outside of these types of places. She described the only support she has experienced as being from,
…other people trying to figure out who they are and where they’ve been in the world too.

And it isn’t just me, this freak of nature who didn’t get to have the life I should have had.

I wasn’t alone anymore.

These places of outgroup support are collective and formed from ExVangelicals creating community outside of evangelicalism. With their communal identity, ExVangelical can embrace diversity, collective self-recovery, locate resources for self-understanding, and gain insight into identity-based knowledge regarding race, sex, gender, sexuality, dis/abilities, and class (hooks, 2009). Not only are these attributes found in the promise of ExVangelical place and belonging, but they are rhetorically and poetically constructed through a similar lens to Powell’s (2007) argument regarding regional identity, community, and place. The communal purpose of the ExVangelical identity is built by what an ExVangelical is, how an ExVangelical comes to be, and what an ExVangelical is for. Anna stated seeing people who have left the Church not rely on church or religious family for community has been helpful in her formation of what counts as place. She described “seeing people build community in other ways that doesn’t exist around showing up for church and being part of a meal train when something happens… just seeing more, especially women… create community outside of religion has been nice.” Caleigh explained how locating other ExVangelicals online has allowed her to see others who have disconnected from place, “made it out and separated themselves and [have] an identity that [is] no longer tied to religion.” Similarly, Aliza described how seeing people exist in outgroup places has been helpful to her own experiences. She explained, “for me, it has felt [like] this little guiding light to watch all of these people… [live] normal functional lives outside of church. In fact, people seem to be living happy, healthy lives outside of the church.” “Outgroup” place
allows ExVangelicals to name themselves and each other as individuals uniquely being shaped by their specific disconnection from previous evangelical place.

**Supportive Learning Places**

Alongside creating “outgroup” place, ExVangelicals disconnect from evangelical places and construct supportive learning places. These places are intended to foster an experience opposite to evangelical purity. Instead of learning about oneself through the binary of pure/impure morality, supportive learning places allow ExVangelicals to embrace the nuance inherent to identity and religiosity. Unlike “outgroup” place, supportive learning places are specifically locatable places in which ExVangelicals could experience questioning their faith, identity, and histories. This meta-theme speaks to an important component of how space symbolically becomes place through narrative and critical transformation (Blair, et al., 2010; Davis, 2022; Enns & Myers, 2021; hooks, 2009).

One type of supportive learning place participants mentioned as helping them balance both narrative and critical engagement in order to deconstruct evangelical purity was substance abuse support/recovery groups. Emma explained how ExVangelical meetings are helpful in the same way AA meetings are helpful for individuals seeking personal support. Like AA, ExVangelicals are not required to meet with other ExVangelicals, but if they are “attracted to what conversations we’re having, then they’re welcome to join.” Olivia explained this connection between ExVangelical places and Al-Anon by stating,

> Al-Anon taught me a lot, that my parents didn't teach me, that the church didn't teach me, that were just healthy concepts…It's cornerstone [is] getting help from your higher power. And I think that Al-Anon provided this vehicle for me to hold onto a relationship with my higher power. It provided a way for me to see that God as I knew him could still
be good and could still love me. And it gave me enough to hold on to my faith and know what to do with it and have actionable steps for me to take in my daily life…In a lot of ways Al-Anon kind of mimics church. So, you've got your group and you share. It's very healthy to feel like you share your experiences. Everybody there empathizes with you. They're there to help you, encourage you, support you, but no one's telling you what to do, which is what they're all doing in church.

Although not comparing ExVangelical place to substance abuse support groups, Brom explained how setting up meetings with other ExVangelicals is helpful. He described how having other ExVangelicals around him allows him to “share” and “unload” his “personal trauma with [people] that are going to understand and not judge [me] for it.” Unlike evangelical places, ExVangelical places do “not offer the same tools that the Church offers to fix it. ‘You need to pray about this,’ instead it’s more saying, ‘I’m so sorry that happened to you.’” According to Brom, a supportive learning place fosters “that sense of community and understanding [ExVangelicals are] looking for.” Brom explained how important fostering ExVangelical community is as he stated, “I just hope for a healthy community and also to be able to be supportive if people that I care about start to questions things like I did.” He explained that his ExVangelical community has helped him explore questions regarding religion and sexuality and that “being able to have those discussions without the judgement that this is something that’s automatically wrong…has been really helpful…because that’s always felt like a scary topic to talk about” because “of the fear that was instilled in me as a child.” However, in fostering a supportive learning place, Brom states these types of exploratory conversations “don’t feel so scary.” These three meta-themes of disconnection from place, “outgroup” place, and supportive
learning place represent some ways by which ExVangelicals use place as a rhetorical tool to formulate belonging and explore the “scary” liminality of post-purity.

**Space as Process**

Similar to the process of rhetorical place, ExVangelicals use space not only to understand their own identity, but to cultivate a counter-religious cultural identity to foster adaptive and non-aversive experiences. While the usage of place allows ExVangelicals to locate discourses needing to be divorced from and discourses needing to be exemplified, ExVangelicals use of space allows them to sift through the desired meaning of their identity. In space, ExVangelicals do not focus on locating ExVangelicalism (or do not emphasize the positionality of ExVangelicalism), but rather, focus on how they can take part in ExVangelical discourse using the space of their body and voice.

ExVangelicals see the ExVangelical movement as a process, thus providing them space to critically interact with narratives that remain in flux. Participants described how their ExVangelical identity and interaction within ExVangelical places requires them to reorient their understandings of religiosity as fluid, thus counteracting to evangelical purity. When explaining how ExVangelicalism has given her room to express her faith identity as fluid, Aliza stated that this concept would not make sense to individuals unless they were interested and “they wanted to go through it.” She went on to explain that when individuals are open to the fluidity of faith offered by ExVangelicalism, they will “be able to understand they can take their own journey wherever it takes them.” Jess expressed this idea similarly, but described their fluidity of faith through ExVangelicalism as providing them space to learn about other religions in ways they would not have done so when they practiced evangelical Christianity. She explained that seeing her spirituality as wider “felt more authentic to me.” Thea stated that hearing other Ex-
Christians’ narratives allowed them to see their divorce from evangelicalism as something that can happen and be supported. They described how their coworker, an Ex-Catholic, and a former teacher, an ExVangelical, both provided Thea space to voice their criticisms of evangelicalism. Thea expressed this code thoroughly when they explained how critical these two people were since “if anything other than a springboard, [they] allowed space for that…[they] were massively important in that process.” Participants described their identity as allowing them to use rhetorics of space to express their critical counter-religiosity as a process, not easily captured nor bound, and directly opposing purity discourse, situating “safe” religiosity.

**Space-Making From Online Place**

One theme that presented itself throughout the interviews and reflects Fekete and Knippel’s (2020) argument is how social media provides a platform for ExVangelicals to share stories, derive meaning, and form personal connections. Participants named social media content (TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X posts, and YouTube videos), online forums (private Facebook groups) and other means of content shared online (blogs and podcasts) as being influential to not only their knowledge of the ExVangelical movement but helping them discover the versatile and shifting nature of this identity. While this is a central component of the ExVangelical movement, my focus remains on the rhetorical tools utilized by ExVangelicals through online spaces. I label this theme “space-making from online place” as it resembles both place and space converging. Online activity can be placed as ExVangelicals socially and para-socially interact with ExVangelical and other Ex-Religious content and content creators; however, by interacting with the place of socially mediated content, ExVangelicals are inclined to then rhetorically produce ExVangelical ideology; and thus the space of their bodies and voices becomes a rhetorical tool. Unlike the Conceptual ↔ Personal component built into the ExVangelical identity formation,
space-making and online place represents how place is used to locate ExVangelicals, yet space is utilized by how ExVangelicals choose to become involved with ExVangelicalism at intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural levels. In doing so, ExVangelicalism moves beyond just providing a place to locate identity and support, but it offers encouragement for ExVangelicals to wrestle with the liminality of their identity and move beyond purity boundaries set forth within evangelicalism.

Many participants described “hearing” or “learning” about ExVangelicalism through online platforms. Some participants expressed their belief that there are even more ExVangelicals, however, because the label is spread easily as a hashtag, individuals who do not use social media may not know there is a term for them in their unique deconstruction process. Erica described how online sharing of ExVangelicalism is helpful since the stories she reads and hears are from “strangers” and “online communities of people that I don’t know.” She explained how understanding a stranger’s experience and likening it to her own helps her feel less “alone” and less “crazy.” She went on to say,

Years ago, I don’t know that I would have known what to call myself. I just would’ve been this wandering person. But just having a name and knowing that there are similar people out there I think is very helpful.

Jenny explained that because conversations are housed largely online and reaching a wider range of other ExVangelicals, there is room for “corrective talk.” She gave the example of purity culture teachings of the 1990s and early 2000s, church-housed sexual abuse scandals, and the rise of evangelically supported Trump rhetoric coming to light because of online sharing. She stated, “Of course, there is a ton more work to be done, but I do think the conversations [are] certainly being had a lot more now than they used to be.” The usage of online place to formulate
the ExVangelical movement allows individuals to interact with #Exvangleical and other online ExVangelical forums to see the role of evangelical purity in their social worlds and thus, use their bodies and voice to counter-act such ideology.

Participants described feeling less lonely when interacting with ExVangelicalism online, seeing the role they can play within the movement, and several participants described their own interactions and online sharing. From producing and guest speaking on podcasts, writing blogs, messaging other ExVangelicals to provide encouragement, taking part in private online groups, and one participant described hosting a Zoom support group for middle-aged ExVangelical women, participants actively took a role on online place, enacted their ExVangelical identity, and became involved in breaking down evangelical boundaries.

**Identification Through Storytelling**

In their effort to critically deconstruct purity discourse through the rhetorical work of their identity, identification plays a large role for ExVangelicals. Participants’ stories regarding their part in the ExVangelical movement indicated how identification played a role in the formation of their belonging. Participants’ sense of belonging was formed by identification through the act of storytelling. During the interviews, participants described their ExVangelical journey being transformed by encountering ExVangelical stories. While participants expressed their role as ExVangelicals is not to “sell” or “evangelize” their counter-religiosity, their narratives indicated how their identity becomes a persuasive strategy.

Participants described how storytelling is central to the ExVangelical movement. An ExVangelical testimony tells a story of who and what they are through a non-normative purity-to-impurity conceptualization of religiosity. Unlike evangelical stories and practices of rhetorical witnessing (Vivian, 2014) in which the evangelical tells a tale representing their experience of
being unsure (impure) and transitioning to surety (purity), ExVangelicals share their stories of moving away from “Truth” and coming to a place where they can question, doubt, and be unsure. Participants provided examples of these stories being shared in various contexts. Jess explained that having close friendships with other ExVangelicals her age is helpful since they are “people that knew firsthand what that was like and could recognize things and question it and points things out.” Brooke expressed that she thinks “the thing that has been the most helpful is other people being willing to be vulnerable and to share.” Caleigh and Brom explained how short-form content creators who share their stories via TikTok and Instagram Reels help others recognize the construction of agency within ExVangelicalism. Caleigh stated these stories help “put things in other perspectives [that] I hadn’t questioned before.” Brom argued that other Ex-religious stories being told help as well. He stated Ex-Mormon/LDS and Ex-Jehovah’s Witness stories provide examples of how “leaving the Church is leaving the community” and “seeing these stories and what they struggle with helps put into perspective what I struggle with.”

Beyond the storytelling happening with close friends or from online places, participants described storytelling happening within intimate and intra-personal-focused relationships. Several participants named how going to therapy and establishing a client-therapist relationship allowed them to share their own stories and be given feedback to trust the purity-to-impurity testimony. Caleigh described how having a therapist with which she could balance her purity-to-impurity ExVangelical story helped her “just get out all of my thoughts, all of my feelings, and all of my questions.” Brooke explained how after her discussing her struggle with transitioning from pure evangelicalism to ExVangelicalism, her therapist named her past experiences with purity as “bad,” “spiritual manipulation,” and “an abuse of power”—thus indicating religious trauma. Brooke stated, “being able to express and process externally for me is just really helpful”
and learning “you are not gaslighting yourself.” Similarly, Becky stated that the availability of the label “ExVangelical” and owning it as an identity “actually did so much to help heal.” From a self-focused perspective, Becky explained how her working towards her MFA degree helped provide her the tools to write her story. She disclosed how her writing her own narrative for possible publication has helped her recognize her agency woven throughout a deconstruction process. Following Anderson (2007), Becky and other participants quite literally use their identity as a “memoir of transformation” allowing us to see how counter-religious identities contradict normative religious identities and the order of a “pure” testimony.

While ExVangelicalism provides connection for individuals, several of the participants expressed how there also exists a struggle with identifying as an “Ex” to a previous religious doctrine. Olivia described how she has “always struggled to really own that label of ExVangelical.” She explained that she “didn’t want to identify or form a community with resentment or hurt or trauma or whatever.” Similarly, when seeing the call for participation for this study, SG explained how she had to acknowledge her identity and story. She stated,

The moment of seeing that… [I had to] forcefully grasp [ExVangelical] as a holding identity…maybe I’m a little hesitant of that…even the ‘ex’ type of term, I feel like its saying your ex-boyfriend’s name. I know that I’m ‘ex,’ but I don’t want to say it out loud.”

Instead of creating stories that provide clear and packaged ideas of religiosity, ExVangelical’s identification process of storytelling represents the nuance of belonging and critiquing purity discourse, and this includes the tension of carrying such a divisive label. The nuanced attraction of “ExVangelical” identification tells a story of a non-normative connection to the larger purpose
of the movement. Thea summarizes this nebulous identification process when they explained that “whenever I first heard the word, I felt like a weird connection to it, and I wasn’t sure why.”

From these interviews, we understand the rhetorical construction of the ExVangelical movement as multi-layered and is punctuated by the process provided through rhetorics of space and place. Because of this, post-purity ExVangelicalism shifts and evolves as it responds to evangelical purity. From asking how ExVangelicalism places itself in the larger American evangelical movement, I transition to asking what and why ExVangelicals function as such a unique form of religious purity deconstruction.

3.3 Post-Purity Purpose

When questioning how ExVangelicals create belonging through their counter-religious label and critical dissent of purity, we must also ask why their movement functions in such a clear dissenting way. The stories told and the language used by the participants reflect what Flores (1996) calls a rhetoric of difference. From Flores' analysis of Chicana feminist identity creation, Flores argues that a rhetoric of difference is used as a rhetorical strategy to create belonging and agency in a space of liminality. By performing a rhetoric of difference, individuals who exist in boundary-less identities can “carv[e] out a space for themselves where they can break down constraints imposed by other cultures and groups” (p. 143). While asking why ExVangelicals willingly (and purposefully) use a deconstructive label to claim their religiosity, the purpose of their identity serves to function through a rhetoric of difference and as representative of “lived Christianities” (Barreto & Sirvent, 2019) that tell stories of liminal post-Christianity. This purposive rhetoric of difference punctuates ExVangelicalism existing as a unique and important movement of deconstruction and is represented through three emerging themes: Discomfort with leaving, community limbo, and ExVangelicalism as nuanced.
3.3.1 Discomfort With Leaving

A substantive experience discussed in my conversations with participants was the ways by which they “left” evangelicalism. The very notion of being an “ExVangelical” implies a rhetorical transition that conflates ideas of religious place and space. Thus, “leaving” what would have been known as a clear, bound, and placed practice of evangelicalism (church, family, relationship, etc.) becomes an uncomfortable experience. The verbiage used by the participants to express what “leaving” entails displays how they see the purpose in their deconstruction. Brom described his process of leaving evangelicalism made him feel like he was “being held hostage” and that the loss of his formal community made him feel “like a failure.” Aliza said this leaving is difficult since it requires one to second guess what one was “taught growing up” and never had the “space to question [their] beliefs.” Alison said that the ExVangelical journey intimidates people as it is “scary.” This “scary” notion of leaving evangelicalism was amplified by Jenny when she explained that being an ExVangelical is “walking away from the faith” and that it can be “harder for some people because walking away from the faith is so taboo.” While a “scary” act of “walking away” that confronts strong ties and makes one feel like a “failure” implies the ExVangelical journey is a long, drawn-out process, it is also described as an experience with immediate impact. Thea stated that evangelicalism was “literally a bubble that I had to pop and leave.” Aliza too described evangelicalism as a “bubble,” however, because it functions as such, when an ExVangelical leaves, evangelicals too feel the discomfort. She described people who subscribe to evangelical purity as “unhealthy,” and as they see ExVangelicals attempt to “get healthy,” the “discomfort goes both ways.” She went on to state,

I think for some reason it’s really hard for unhealthy people to watch people get healthy…It's uncomfortable to leave because you're calling out a power structure that's
not healthy. And so, speaking out about power, people who are in power and are abusive, the reason the power system operates is because people stay silent.

A significant source of the discomfort experienced by ExVangelicals is due to the correlation between family and faith. With evangelicalism’s fixation on family and youth (Luhr, 2009; Moslener, 2015), when an ExVangelical attempts to deconstruct their faith, they too deconstruct their family since, as Becky states, “I was born, literally born and raised in [evangelicalism].” Thea described this specific experience of ExVangelicalism was “a wrestling match” because they “felt like I was betraying what I had come from.” When asked why “betrayal” was something they feel, Thea went on to explain that their decision to “leave this ideology [meant] I was then leaving basically anything that was comfortable to me…[it] meant leaving my family, leaving friends, and leaving a lot of what made up my childhood.” Dissimilar to Thea, SG offered her experiences of “leaving” evangelicalism since she had joined it as a young adult outside of her family being a bit easier compared to individuals “who are really born in it, their entire families are engulfed in it. That can be incredibly traumatic to leave.”

Many participants explained that the trickiness to ExVangelicalism is that it requires them to rhetorically separate themselves from their family’s idea of faith. Paige described how she has been “shaped” by evangelical discourse and that it was built into her “upbringing,” thus remaining “part of my identity.” Anna explained that the ExVangelical movement cannot expect her to experience a “clean break” because her experience with evangelicalism “doesn’t disappear…it still exists because that was how I grew up…I can’t just dismiss my entire childhood and adolescence.” Anna went on to explain that ExVangelicalism is an act of “divorce,” thus qualifying it as something that indicates deconstructing a belief system alongside relationships and familial structures. During our interview, Brom emphasized that individuals
wanting to understand ExVangelicalism must understand that ExVangelicals are individuals recognizing how entrapping evangelicalism is and how often evangelicals do not recognize this themselves. He argued,

Even the way that they talk, even the way that evangelicals talk about the Church, they don't necessarily use the terms “trapped,” but they talk around being trapped. “If I left this, this church is my family, if I left this church, I would be leaving my family.”

This discomfort with leaving due to the conflation of church and family allows us to understand a specific layer to the purposive rhetoric of difference used by ExVangelicals in their attempt to deconstruct evangelicalism and move away from purity discourse.

Beyond the frustrations involved with leaving family alongside their previous faith, ExVangelicals describe the discomfort with leaving as one that necessitates tricky navigation. Aliza claimed the ExVangelical movement is not a straightforward experience of leaving one’s faith since it requires individuals to disengage with their faith critically. Not only do ExVangelicals leave their church, but they discuss evangelical churches. She said doing so is “a bold thing” since it “takes a lot to undo your faith and figure out your own beliefs when you’ve been in the system where you aren’t really allowed to challenge those beliefs.” This navigation requiring boldness was described when Caleigh explained that since “over a quarter of a century of my life essentially” was given to evangelicalism, “that doesn’t just go away, that’s still part of who I was in a sense.” She went on to explain that being an ExVangelical does not erase her evangelicalism, but it works to “complicate it” and encourages her to critically engage with “a lot of things related to evangelical beliefs and way of life.” Emma stated this form of navigation is uniquely tied to the ExVangelical movement because the “fact that people have trauma, that people need therapy, that people need to form entire movements of people to help people get
over [evangelicalism]” shows how “vehement” evangelical teachings are for people. Elane expressed the nature of this tricky component of ExVangelicalism when she expressed that “navigating relationships is a mess.” However messy, participants’ stories spoke of how the ExVangelical movement, and its rhetorical purpose, helped “normalize” the act of “leaving” even amongst the discomfort.

### 3.3.2 Community Limbo

The usage of a rhetoric of difference and a glimpse of plurality in the ExVangelical movement is represented by how participants described themselves as operating in a “community limbo.” Within this incomplete concept of community, ExVangelicals shift between a deconstruction of one type of community yet remaining open to new types of community. This two-part purpose is similar to Flores’ rhetoric of difference, as ExVangelicals have to carve out space for their own voice before they can create new space to draw connections between the different parts of their identity. However, beyond simply responding to their liminal religiosity, ExVangelicals must critically engage with what is deemed inappropriate from their previous community. Hence, ExVangelicals experience community limbo by first, recognizing the toxicity of their community and then dissect religion as a formulaic necessity of community.

**Recognizing Toxicity**

Many of the participants described their ExVangelical experience as being punctuated by moments of recognizing toxicity happening in evangelical communities and feeling a need to separate from such spaces. The language of toxicity was born from SG’s interview when she described how she was sold on evangelical church when she was a young adult and in search of community. She explained,
They absolutely just encapsulated me and, yeah, lured me in with a sense of community and a lot of things that seemed really, really positive at first. But I’ve always kind of had this unsettling in the back of my mind, [a] critique of the church. But I just kind of threw it to the side and was like, “Oh, the church isn’t perfect.”

She went on to describe her ExVangelical journey being one that attempts to get out of that “kind of toxicity.”

Several participants described hearing others’ stories of reflecting on past toxic communities as helping them recognize current issues with their evangelical community. Paige stated that when she heard stories of recognizing toxicity in evangelical spaces on a podcast, she said that she at first, “felt kind of sad for them.” She explained that while they were naming the same issues she was having, she had yet to become open to ExVangelicalism, thus the resonance with their trauma helped her recognize her own experiences with toxicity and brought her to a “place where I [realized] that the solution was…that I needed to walk away.” Other participants described how critical journaling helped them recognize the toxicity of their evangelical community. Caleigh described how during each Sunday service at her former church, she would sit with an open notebook out, ready to take note of things that “seem problematic from my stance.” She recognized herself pulling away from worship and prayer during the service and realized that “this is not a good environment for me to be able to continue to go down that path, and I don’t align with many things this church believes anymore.” Brooke described this aspect of the community limbo, of recognizing the toxicity of one’s community and needing to separate from it as a feeling of being “stuck in the middle of [an] icky place.”


Dissecting Religion as a Necessity of Community

Alongside recognizing the toxicity of evangelical spaces, participants posit ExVangelicals must dissect religion from community and recognize that community can exist without the prevalence for evangelical discourse and beliefs. SG explained that once she was able to “re-navigate” and “examine the world around me in a non-religious lens,” she was able to recognize “that community exists without religion” and can still be a source of “comfort.” Participants described how seeing other post-Christians create community outside of religious spaces helped them see the value of dissecting religion from the notion of community. Jenny claimed that through her ExVangelical experience of dissecting religion from community allowed her to see the value of online communities. She claimed,

I don’t know that I would’ve been able to find it the same way or to that extent in person because it’s hard to have these conversations in person with people that you don’t know how they’re going to respond…so it’s interesting how the online space was very instrumental in me finding community.

The process of locating a new form of community without the presence of evangelicalism was often described in thought-provoking language. Brooke stated that she thinks “it’s going to constantly be a cycle” while Elane described her attempt to create non-religious community as being “stagnant.” She said, “It’s been just kind of life without…the community that I was always so familiar with. But at the same time, I feel freer than ever to be friends with and love and interact with whoever I want to.” Erica described an experience when she was filling out medical paperwork at her doctor’s office and when they asked her to write what religion she associated with, and she wrote “none” for the first time. She explained, “That was the first that I had verbalized [that] I don’t know if I even fit in where I fit in anymore…I’m not sure.” Jenny
claimed that the locating of non-religious community is difficult since “at first, I wasn’t even really sure what I was looking for.” When asked why locating or creating non-religious community is a difficult task, Jenny explained that she had not known secular or even non-evangelical community, so she claimed, “at first, I wasn’t even really sure what I was looking for.”

The process of recognizing toxicity and dissecting religion from possible spaces of community however does not reflect a compete destruction of Christian community. Many participants explained that through the ExVangelical movement, they have been provided tools to wrestle with the loss of unhelpful community. Evan explained that form his perspective, ExVangelicals are not motivated to “burn the whole thing down,” rather, aim to form community with each other and others outside of evangelicalism as well. However, Evan’s perspective fails to capture the negative experiences of ExVangelical’s community limbo. In their rhetoric of difference, ExVangelicals experience a religious liminality that causes loss and isolation. SG explained that the ExVangelical process is of a “separation process, [and] it can feel very isolating.” Erica described that while she is grateful to not be in an evangelical church, she still finds herself “missing the community.” She explained further,

That's probably the only thing that I miss is when you get married and you have a baby and when all these things happen, you have this community people that show up for you.

And I've built that community up again, but it took me years and years and years, and it was a very lonely, lonely time.

Elane also spoke from her experience of not only separating from evangelical spaces, but also American evangelical spaces when she moved overseas. She claimed to “feel lonely sometimes because I don’t know how to feel, how to find community anymore the way that I used to.” In
ExVangelical’s two-part community limbo, while they create an identity of liminality through a rhetoric of difference, they too experience a liminal type of religiosity that reflects their lived Christianities, their experience of Christianity that does not fit the normative narrative of Christianhood, and their fluid conceptualizations of religiosity that go beyond theology, thus reflecting a rhetorical purpose of their identity.

### 3.3.3 Nuanced System of ExVangelicalism

The last emerging theme from the interview data to help answer the “what” and “why” of ExVangelicalism’s rhetorical purpose is how ExVangelicals frame their counter religious identity as one of nuance—in direct opposition to American evangelicalism’s usage of direct guidelines. Participants described this nuanced system of ExVangelicalism through six meta-themes: No capital “T” Truth; personal state of liminality; issues with the label; proactive emotions; fluidity of faith; and self-focus.

**No Capital “T” Truth**

The first meta-theme speaks to ExVangelicals’ purpose with countering evangelicalism’s authoritative use of inerrancy and its fixation on singular truth and logic. During the interviews, participants explained that with their cultivation of their ExVangelical identity, they work around the concept of the capital “T” Truth, and instead wrestle with the nuance of pluralistic truths. Caleigh explained the capital “T” truth as a sign of defensiveness, and that her usage of the ExVangelical identity provides her “mindful” and “non-defensive-type language.” When asked how they handle the different beliefs within ExVangelicalism, Thea explained that it can be more liberating to meet an ExVangelical with different beliefs since it directly contradicts how evangelicalism was structured for them. They stated that the “people I’ve met have not been upset about different takes on ExVangelicalism because they understand the issue that is saying
‘this is Truth.’… there is no capital ‘T’ Truth.” Thea then added, “Why would I ever impose it on someone else?” When asked what “capital ‘T’ Truth” meant in her experiences with evangelical spaces, Anna stated that her ExVangelical identity allows her to “have a different belief breakdown as far as what I believe within Christianity,” however she does not partake in the “evangelical Truth” as “it is taught in white, cis-, hetero churches.” Interestingly, Brooke explained that the nuanced truths of ExVangelicalism happens because ExVangelicals are people she described as “opening [themselves] up to [a] broader community.” The nuance built into the ExVangelical movement is heavily influenced by ExVangelicals counteracting the concept of a homogenous truth, or rather, an order to truth.

**Personal State of Liminality**

Beyond the embrace of a plurality of truths, ExVangelicals personally curate a nuanced religiosity in how they frame their own liminality. While it could be argued that most aspects of the ExVangelical experience depict a liminal religiosity, this meta-theme derives from the language used by participants to describe the state of liminality they exist within. Thus, “State of Liminality” allows us to see how ExVangelicals place their nuanced religiosity. Erica described her ExVangelical state as one that meets different thresholds. “Everybody has a different threshold,” she explained, “So do you feel that you’re at a threshold where you can stay and you can justify staying for whatever reason? Or have you just reached a point where you’re like, ‘I can’t do this anymore?’” The “thresholds” of ExVangelicalism, as Erica puts it, represent the various states ExVangelicals may choose to participate in evangelical and/or Christian spaces. Aliza explained that she met an apparent threshold in which she realized her state of ExVangelicalism would not involve evangelical practices. She described herself coming “to this
conclusion that, ‘Yep, I don’t think I’m going to ever go back there. I have no interest…I am now an ExVangelical.’”

Thea described the state of liminality with their own sense of ExVangelicalism as “there [being] different levels of being proactive” and engaging with ExVangelicalism. Paige, on the other hand, described her experience with ExVangelicalism as one that goes through phases. She explained that her “different phases” of becoming an ExVangelical slowly allowed her to become “comfortable with my contradictions.” Olivia used the language of construction to explain the different layers of construction (deconstruction and reconstruction) involved with the ExVangelical identity. She describes this process through the metaphor of constructing a building. She states,

I'm coming back to a place of what I call "reconstruction." So, I've deconstructed, and now we're reconstructing. So now I'm like, "Okay, we're gonna, let's reconstruct this building. Let's reconstruct this house on some firmer ground and stilts than what the first one was built on." So, a lot of that involves me, yes, questioning my beliefs before and reforming beliefs.

Thea described that while others might define “ExVangelicalism” as a “radical movement,” they see it as a “proactive state of being.” Thus, from the participants’ stories, we understand the nuance of ExVangelicalism as a liminal state of being that converges ideas of thresholds, phases, levels, and constructions in effort for ExVangelicals to reach a state of being comfortable and proactive with their own liminal religiosity.

**Issues with Label**

While participants described reaching various levels of comfort with their identity, the label “ExVangelical” also causes hesitation. As participants told stories of their personal journey
with ExVangelicalism, many described issues they had with taking on such a label due to its nuanced nature. SG explained that she was “hesitant of taking [the label] on” because of “how gripping and defining” the label “evangelical Christian” had previously been for her. She explained that the enthusiasm she had felt once for the label “evangelical” was not felt to the same degree when she considered herself becoming an active ExVangelical. Both Caleigh and Olivia explained that by using the label “ExVangelical”, they both fear being limited by its perceived dimensions. Olivia stated, “You don’t have to just put this label on you. You can be a complex person.” Caleigh problematized the usage of identity labels saying, “there is always more than one perception of an identity. There’s always more than one way to name something, to label something, and that includes yourself.”

Not only do the participants acknowledge that the usage of a label helps with the multiplicity involved with a post-evangelical purity identity, but some explained that the label “ExVangelical” itself may not always be accessible to people. Aliza, Brom, Evan, Jenny, and Erica each pointed out that if it were not for social media, podcasts, or the spread of #Exvangleical, they would not have known of a label to identify with and signify a collective identity representative of a specific sub-movement within the longstanding Christian deconstruction movement. Similar to De Kosnik and Feldman’s (2019) argument regarding hashtag identifiers indicative of social movements, Evan expressed how the fact that “ExVangelical” is a hashtag allows individuals to critically engage with it. However, only those with social media access may see the value in disseminating the term. Aliza explained that the phenomenon of people “leaving their faith and changing faith or changing belief systems [is] not a new concept.” Thus, the label “ExVangelical” does not always carry known weight. She stated, “People leaving the church isn’t new. That’s been happening for, I mean probably forever. So, I
definitely think there are people who aren’t on social media [but] would be considered ‘ExVangelical’ for sure.” While the label “ExVangelical” provides identification, space, and even allows individuals to mess with ideas of place and belonging in their state of liminality, the label remains trickily evasive to some as it remains a token tied to shared knowledge spread from online spaces.

*Proactive Emotion*

The fourth meta-theme expressing the nuance inherent to ExVangelicalism was the usage of proactive emotion. By “proactive,” I refer to Ahmed’s (2010) situating unhappiness and one’s understanding of their own unhappiness as a “process of consciousness raising” (p. 87). Participants expressed how their ExVangelical identity provides them room to engage with emotions they felt were dismissed from their previous evangelical spaces. Brom explained this concept when we discussed how he described the purpose of ExVangelicalism. Since being an ExVangelical means being aware of religious trauma one experienced, Brom explained that then becoming an ExVangelical means “taking on this identity and sort of join[ing] this informal group just to heal [one’s] trauma…to find people that are as hurt as they are.” Olivia explained this by describing the ExVangelical movement as one that holds “bitterness.” She stated that when she thinks of “the label ExVangelical, I think of anger, I think of resentment. I think of communities who get together and just talk shit about the church.” However, Olivia acknowledges that these negatively perceived emotions may “embod[y] relief and peace and healthy distance and healthy boundaries.” Evan explained that while ExVangelicals may often be “rebelling against something specific that could be bad or harmful,” the rebellion could show an ExVangelical “some good aspects…some good morals that could be taken from it.” Elane expressed how each ExVangelical’s journey may start from what are perceived as negative
emotions but can become a catalyst for critical engagement and that “each person’s
deconstruction maybe starts with a different topic” that ExVangelicalism tries to cover.
Participants described their ExVangelical identity helping them process grief, anger, resentment,
and hurt. While each of their experiences is unique to their ExVangelical process, Brom stated it
best when he explained that ExVangelical affect motivates individuals “to be around people the
same way that it felt to be around the church. They want to have a group that feels like they
know them.” The affect expressed and experienced within ExVangelicalism are proactive
emotions, driving an ExVangelical to wrestle with their post-evangelical religiosity, and allowing
themselves to become conscious of what are often deemed negative emotions.

Fluidity of Faith

A consistent theme throughout the participants’ narratives was how they captured their
personal ExVangelicalism as a faith-based identity that moved freely and fluidly. Some described
their transition from evangelical to ExVangelical as a “disentangling” and a process with no clear
end goal. Unlike evangelical purity scripts (of which I cover more in depth in the following
chapter), ExVangelicals describe their counter-religiosity as ebbing and flowing with less
constraint held by the concept of “salvation” for which to strive. Brooke described her
ExVangelical faith as “tricky” since “it’s not a linear process. It’s not like there’s a start and a
finish.” Some participants likened it to their identity as part of the LGBTQ+ community.
Caleigh, Emma, and Thea expressed their ability to wrestle with their ExVangelicalism since it
reminds them of how they wrestle with their sexualities and gender in a cis-heteronormative
world. As Caleigh stated, “coming out is not a lone and done experience…I come out every day
of my life.” She then went on to explain that that her ExVangelical identity is one that she
explores every day as well. The fluidity of the ExVangelical identity purposefully allows
individuals to extract themselves from a formulaic faith identity. Jenny summarized this meta-theme by stating,

…becoming an ExVangelical is…fluid and it's a moving away from that evangelical identity and kind of disentangling yourself from that belief system. I don't feel like it's binary necessarily... I think that there can be a spectrum there, and the point that you become ExVangelical can maybe be different for different people, but it's kind of a journey away from evangelicalism toward whatever ExVangelicalism means to you or whatever becoming, you're no longer evangelical, whatever that means to you.

**Self-Focus**

The sixth meta-theme derived from the analysis allows us to understand how ExVangelical identity becomes a radical act of self-focus and respect for other ExVangelical’s self-focus. The participants explained that while existentialism meant one thing for themselves, they acknowledge that it may mean something else for others. However, due to their ExVangelical work, they understand this difference—whether it be from liminal, emotional, or nuanced experiences—and chose to remain focused on their own ExVangelical journey. Therefore, ExVangelicalism becomes a non-mission-focused practice of faith. This particular construct of ExVangelicalism helps us understand a working towards rhetoric of impurities and will be covered in Chapters Five and Six. However, when thinking about the purpose of the identity label, and ExVangelical’s self-focus allows them to give room for personal experiences. Olivia explained that if someone were to be interested in ExVangelicalism, she would encourage them “sort through it and figure it out for yourself and figure out what it means for you if you want to identify with that term.” Jenny, Caleigh, Alison, and Brooke described knowing ExVangelicals who still practice Christianity and other ExVangelicals who steer clear from
Christian spaces and beliefs. They both communicated that the nuance built into the ExVangelical movement allows them to hold both performances of ExVangelicalism as correct. As Caleigh stated, “you personify it your way, I’m going to personify it my way.” Alison explained that this concept may not be understood by “people outside of the ExVangelical community,” but each ExVangelical “ha[s] their own experiences and different reasons of why we really left.”

The nuance of ExVangelicalism and its notions of a multiplicity of truths, liminality, label issues, proactive emotions, and self-focus, create a conflict in this work. While I aim to help us understand the context of ExVangelicalism and its own rabidly growing movement, from my critical qualitative methodological approach to these interviews and Edwards’ (2021) argument, religious identity, particularly post- and counter-religious identities, hardly reflect a homogenous response to a homogenous religious culture. Jenny reminded me of this when she stated how important awareness of ExVangelicalism is because while most ExVangelicals “ended up here…all of us are so different.” Becky even warned me “to be careful to not group us all together.” While these participants may have stepped away from evangelical communities, they did so not only to question religious teachings influenced by purity culture, their rhetorical use of the identity “ExVangelical” tells us how individuals can be prompted to deepen, reclaim, and further understand religious and social engagement.

In this chapter, we understand three rhetorical constructs of ExVangelicalism. The people who create, adopt, and perform this identity, the ways by which they problematize place in effort to create belonging, and the purpose of us visualizing this identity as we respond to purity discourse. As Anderson (2007) reminds us, identity, through our use of labels, is a rhetorical strategy mapping agency-making and the limits to one’s agency. I do not focus on ExVangelicals
solely for what they are, or claim to be, but because they represent rhetors using specific language to involve an audience “through the expression of who or what one is” (p. 4). This chapter serves as a contextualized case study helping us critically engage with counter-religiosity as we wonder what purposes lie in countering purity and striving towards a rhetoric of impurities. In the following chapter, I provide another steppingstone towards this final argument by examining purity discourse from the ExVangelical lens. From the terms used to express ExVangelicalism, their use of place, space, and identification to conceptualize and personalize their role, the unique discomfort and limbo experienced with leaving evangelical communities, and the overarching nuance heavily punctuating ExVangelicalism, we understand ExVangelicals as teachers readying us to grapple with questions of purity—whether religious, social, or both—constructing culture, ideologies, and discourse.
CHAPTER 4

Purity as Discourse: Queering Post-Purity Narratives and the ExVangelical Body as Place

“You are taught that [purity] means a lot of different things because you have to be pure and godly and holy for the Lord.”

- “Becky”

As argued previously, the concept of purity—in its religious, spiritual, and cultural frames—regulates relationship based on ideas of moral and immoral consequences. In non-evangelically centered spaces, purity is manufactured as an ideological platform in which boundaries are enacted to categorize, distinguish, and ultimately protect systems of sovereignty and to safeguard institutions (Douglas, 1966; Foucault, 1990; Shotwell, 2016). As these scholars meticulously point out, purity becomes a tolerated form of colonialism. From Chapter Three, we understand how post-purity space and ExVangelical place are constructed in counter-response to purity and the concept of serving one’s sovereignty by “keeping pure.” As all layers of one’s selfhood are involved in the questioning of one’s purity, race, gender, sexuality, disability, and submission become components woven into the fabric of one’s state of “purity.”

To investigate purity’s influence within these layers, this chapter, examines purity itself—from post-purity narratives—as a discursive tool used to rhetorically construct the body as place in need of purity. Specifically, I queer two types of ExVangelical narratives while exploring purity-as-discourse. By queering our understanding of purity and moving away from simple categories of premarital sexuality and gender roles, we see purity as (1) centering the feminine body to orchestrate its meaning and placing it within fraught ideas of guilt and shame and (2) as both a cultural discourse and intimate experience symbolizing the role of the body. In doing so, purity rejects the body as embodied space and constructs boundaries so that through disembodiment, the body becomes place. Through a comparative analysis of published memoirs
and interview data, queer theory, and rhetorics of place and space I continue investigating how post-purity stories name purity in an effort to understand how purity as space places the body, thus moving past singular understandings of purity.

4.1 Exploring Purity as Discourse

Exploring American evangelical purity as discourse is important for three reasons. First, the scholarship on purity has largely positioned purity within the context of a cultural movement. Such research positions the evangelical purity culture movement of the 1990s to 2010s, and its subsequent movement “Purity Culture 2.0” that reshapes purity language to fit a more culturally egalitarian audience (Abraham, 2021), at the crux of these studies. However, by focusing on the discursive elements baked into the purity by which ExVangelicals attempt to deconstruct, we understand both purity and post-purity as ongoing discourses with capacity to move beyond specific and located cultural contexts. Second, analyzing purity-as-discourse adds to scholarship having examined purity as culture. The work exploring purity as a cultural movement positions purity merely as “safe sex” practices for American youth in effort to mask larger religious political involvement. (DeRogatis, 2015; Fahs, 2010; Hermann, 2021; Houser, 2021; Irvine, 2002; McGrath, 2022; Moslener, 2015). By critically engaging with purity as discourse, I offer intimate insight into the rhetorical functioning of purity and post-purity. Third, By using a queer feminist rhetorical lens, my investigation of purity as discourse moves beyond questions of gender. Scholarship examining purity culture sheds light on how the concept of “purity” is used as measurement in protecting whiteness and situating white families as the centerpiece of American culture (Du Mez, 2020; Kelly, 2016; Luhr, 2009). Additionally, researchers questioning how purity incessantly centers whiteness urge scholars to ask how race remains invisible within purity doctrine (Moultrie, 2017; Natarajan, et al., 2022; Schultz, 2021).
Therefore, I examine purity as discourse and unpack the rhetorical components of whiteness involved with ExVangelical’s post-purity consciousness through my critical analysis of ExVangelical memoirs and qualitative interviews.

4.2 Theoretical and Methodological Direction

By studying purity as a discourse, I am able to ask how ExVangelicals persist in their endeavor to name purity and reorient how they engage with purity. Whether they consciously or subconsciously rewire the ways by which their evangelical doctrine has positioned them to relate to their body, sexuality, and religiosity, I argue by the very nature of being an ExVangelical, they exist in a state of liminal impurity. They are no longer “pure” evangelicals, nor are they purely non-evangelical. From Chapter Three, we understand how the rhetorical act of naming oneself as an “ExVangelical” allows a post-evangelical to embrace the liminality of being both within and without a religious structure, community, and family and using this liminal stage to promote spaces of nuance, chaos, and doubt; all of which are tenets evangelicalism runs from in search of authority and hierarchies of knowledge.

The space inherent to the ExVangelical identity and movement, as argued in the previous chapter, is a rich text in which to examine purity-as-discourse. In this case study, not only do I explore the participants’ \((n = 18)\) stories of purity and unpacking purity, but I weave in published ExVangelical memoirs. Doing so allows me to investigate both the messy and manufactured accounts of post-purity. In this chapter, I examine stories of post-purity by asking how ExVangelicalism—as space and place—is used as a rhetorical tool to navigate how purity discourse situates the body as place in need of purity. Therefore, to methodologically and theoretically investigate, we must understand the rhetorical role of queering narratives, how the body is situated as place, and the text being examined in this chapter: post-purity narratives.
4.2.1 Queering Narratives

Through a queer lens, usual conceptualizations of purity are messed with in effort to locate new modes of understanding. As memoirs and other scholarship examining purity teachings show, purity has an enduring impact microscopically on the individual (Gish, 2018; Houser, 2021; Natarajan, et al., 2022; Stanley, 2020). Because of this, scholars such as Moslener (2022), Natarajan et al. (2022) Ramler (2022), and Schultz (2021) encourage us to further investigate the cultural layers involved with purity and identity. To move in this direction, yet mess with categories of normative knowledge, I queer my coding of participants’ narratives regarding purity and post-purity. Instead of collecting their stories to understand intrapersonal experiences of purity, I explore how purity both discursively and macroscopically functions.

Following Morris’ Queering Public Address and Cruz’s Queering Mennonite Literature, I challenge normative concepts of post-purity narratives. In order to queer normative readings of purity and post-purity, I critically analyze ExVangelical stories for what “has or has not been spoken” (Morris, 2007, p. 4). In doing so, I question basic assumptions of how purity and impurity is read “in service of an antihegemonic worldview” (Cruz, 2019, p. 3). With Morris’ focus on public address and Cruz’s argument centering a specific literary genre as influence, I question how purity and post-purity narratives are constructed in public spaces (published memoirs and ExVangelical online discourse) yet are often manufactured for a specific audience (ExVangelicals seeking identification).

As Linda Kay Klein (2019) writes in her memoir, purity is “an epidemic” (p. 8). Thus, purity must be explored as a discursive epidemic. To do so, I refrain from studying purity discourse as a private sphere, only locatable in personal reflections or expressions of sexuality. Rather, I queer our orientation of purity by placing it front and center, as a public discourse. In
doing so, I explore the possibilities and limitations within post-purity stories as ExVangelicals grapple with stepping away from binaries of understanding, situations of abuse, and the oppressive use of religious authority. Similar to Cruz’s argument for the dire need to examine Mennonite literature with a queer lens, I too argue ExVangelical texts need to be challenged and made uneasy with a queer lens. As discussed previously, scholarship examining post-purity remains largely tied to white cis heteronormativity. Therefore, I interrogate the centricity of white women’s bodies as place in which purity is contested in post-purity stories.

4.2.2 Body as Place

To interrogate how purity discourse centers the white woman body, I explore post-purity accounts of how the body is rhetorically situated as place for purity to exist. As argued in Chapter One, examining body as place allows scholars to ask questions about how the materiality of bodies are deployed, centered, and represented (Butler, 1990a; Grosz, 1992; Hawhee, 2006; Moreland, 2019; Selzer, 1999). Through Moreland’s body as space theory, I examine ExVangelical accounts of how the material space of the body and the social imaginary of purity work hand in hand to create an argument for the body to exist as place through the rhetorical disembodiment of impurities. Scholars examining how purity discursively places itself upon the body have explored how purity texts regarding gender and sexuality situate the body as place (Gish, 2018; Houser, 2021), how bodies are represented in tales of purity and impurity (Fahs, 2010; Kelly, 2016), and how white bodies are invisibly positioned to perform purity as the status quo (Moultrie, 2017; Warren, 2003). To explore this further and examine how purity uses the body as place in need of purity and boundaries keeping impurities at bay, I queer two types of post-purity narratives as they tell somewhat different stories of disembodiment.
By queering narratives, I position ExVangelical narratives as different and sometimes contradictory. Specifically, the methods by which memoirists recount memories and complete their stories with romantic notions of post-purity do not match how participants expressed their own experiences of how their body was positioned as a place in need of purity. Unlike published memoirs relying on past storytelling, participants do not revert to their young selves, but use current terminology and categories of knowledge to deconstruct and question their body as place. Throughout our interviews, participants explained what metaphors were used to discursively place purity on the body and expressed how they are still laboriously unpacking purity discourse. Through a queer feminist lens, I explore how purity discursively situates itself upon the body as place. In the following section, I offer participants’ language to help us understood purity-as-discourse without the manufactured structure of a published memoir. In doing so, I return back to the “messy” and “unpredictable” processes of rhetoric. As Hawhee (2006) positions the rhetoric of bodies, examining how post-purity individuals untangle themselves from purity and the body as place requires me to explore stories that are unfinished, possibly unsellable, and contradictory.

4.2.3 Post-Purity Narratives: ExVangelical Memoirs and Interviews

By situating purity as a political religious discourse, I use ExVangelical narratives as textual insight into the discursive elements of purity. To engage with the public characteristics of discourse and personal experiences of disembodiment, I queer two distinctive types of ExVangelical narratives: ExVangelical memoirs and interviews with the ExVangelical participants from Chapter Three. In addition to an analysis of memoirs as a growing genre of post-purity storytelling, I queer narratives told by participants in their own language in effort to understand how purity places the body. Memoirs written by post-evangelical women critique purity “within evangelical constraints on women’s speech” (Mannon, 2019, p. 152). However,
my interviews with participants present these ExVangelicals as both (a) resisting closure in their post-purity identity and (b) remaining in what Sullivan (2003) terms a “process of ambiguous (un)becoming” (p. v). Therefore, by queering both manufactured and unassuming narratives, I explore multiple layers involved with purity discourse and the ExVangelical body as place.

For this critical analysis, I selected three memoirs by ExVangelicals specifically focusing on experiences with purity culture beyond topics of gender and sexuality and represent what Cruz terms, “uncomfortable narratives” (p. 4). Linda Kay Klein’s *Pure*, Jamie Lee Finch’s *You Are Your Own*, and Cameron Dezen Hammon’s *This Is My Body* were chosen as several participants mentioned these memoirs as helping them navigate their transition from evangelicalism to ExVangelicalism.

**Klein’s “Pure”**

Published in 2018 by Simon and Schuster, Linda Kay Klein’s *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* gained national attention (Gross, 2018; Miller, 2018). In *Pure*, Klein’s focus is on both individual and collective experiences of purity culture. Klein’s handling of purity narratives—both her own and others’ stories—allows her audience to see the wide-reaching tenets of purity discourse and its impact on various levels. Klein handles each chapter by weaving together discursive weapons heralded as purity discourse. She calls these “obstacles,” thus invoking the image of ExVangelicals recognizing that to be “pure” is to face unnatural binaries.

With Klein’s focus on women being “shamed” by the “evangelical movement” of purity, as evidenced by the subtitle of the memoir, her own deconstruction of purity discourse remains largely white-focused as race continues to be unquestioned. Additionally, Klein argues purity goes beyond women, but by working with an editor to publish her work for a wider audience, she
settled on remaining women-centric and keeping the title pithy (L. K. Klein, personal communication, September 17, 2023). With Pure being a leading text in the emerging genre of post-religious memoirs, it is clear that Klein’s presentation of her narrative (and her interviewees’ narratives) is largely manufactured to fit a wider audience. This interestingly contradicts Finch’s and Hammon’s memoirs, as their work seems to focus more on the unique positionality of their own experiences.

**Finch’s “You Are Your Own”**

Published a year after Pure, Jamie Lee Finch’s 2019 self-published book, You Are Your Own: A Reckoning With The Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity, focuses on Finch describing her own religious trauma. In doing so, Finch attempts to provide anecdotal evidence for religious trauma syndrome (Winell, 2012). Finch consistently refers to her growing up within evangelicalism as growing up in an authoritative religious cult and argues American evangelicalism focuses on political power and causes distinctive religious trauma and PTSD. The first half of the memoir presents Finch’s analysis of American evangelicalism. From this analysis, Finch argues evangelicalism thrives alongside fundamentalism and plays a large role in nationalistic rhetoric.

In You Are Your Own, Finch emphasizes that this memoir is the first part of what she offers to her audience. After reading the memoir, the reader is prompted to visit Finch’s website (jamieleefinch.com). Branded with stylized photos of Finch and a menu offering her various services (workshop, podcasts, course, merchandise, and membership), Finch’s website caters to an audience wanting to benefit from Finch’s stylized post-purity ideology. Unlike Klein’s website, Finch’s page emphasizes herself. Her face, body, and name punctuate each page as her concept of post-purity is narrated through her body carrying the trauma of evangelical purity.
teachings. Hence, her memoir thoroughly introduces her reader to the concept of purity treating the body as place through acts of disembodiment.

**Hammon’s “This Is My Body”**

As a creative memoir published by Lookout Books in 2019, Cameron Dezen Hammon’s work represents what Guenther (2019) terms a “text-as-record” by which Hammon’s reader understands her as a queer figure archiving her countering normative ideas of ExVangelicalism. She focuses only on herself and the mundane experiences of longing for religious purity, slowly recognizing toxicity within evangelicalism, attempting to untangle herself from its web, experiencing a turning point which serves as a catalyst in her questioning purity and safety, and ends the memoir with her sitting at a coffee shop and realizing that she is okay with her having become an ExVangelical.

Similar to Klein and Finch, Hammon narrates how evangelical discourse treated her body as place. Hammon’s memoir offers a normative glimpse into an ExVangelical slowly queering themselves and how their body must perform within evangelical places in order to deconstruct evangelical purity. She messes with the clear boundaries of womanhood, wifehood, motherhood, and work as she narrates her navigating what “marks” her as an evangelical and charts her “linguistically getting away” from her evangelical upbringing (Cruz, p. 96). She explains that deconstructing purity works against her “muscle memory” and that she “forgets” herself and what she is “capable of” (Hammon, p. 95). In the final chapter, Hammon writes of meeting with a friend who claims Hammon herself is “marinating in spirit.” She continues by writing that her body is “God-haunted and always will be” (p. 182). As Klein and Finch display in their memoirs, Hammon’s story too centers a woman’s body as the price paid both for purity and in the deconstructing of purity.
To understand purity discourse as both public and intimate, I dive further into varied post-purity narratives by queering interview transcripts in addition to these three published memoirs. Not only do I present purity-as-discourse in order to rhetorically investigate its processes from post-purity perspectives, but I counteract normative categories of purity and post-purity by messing with and frustrating the order of participants’ stories in relationship to memoirs. In doing so, I investigate how post-purity questions the body as place as it is orchestrated by purity discourse. From my dataset, I determined five specific codes: Purity-as-metaphor; purity-as-white womanhood; purity-as-disembodiment; purity-as-panic; and purity as macrocosm.

4.3 Purity-as-Metaphor

By purity-as-metaphor, I do not mean purity exists within specific metaphors or anecdotes, but that purity discourse situates purity and impurity as symbolizing larger domains of social relationship. I argue we must investigate how purity teachings weaponize rhetorics of boundaries and borders. Relating to the specific code of purity-as-metaphor, four themes emerge. From these emerging themes, we understand how purity works anecdotally, as intersectional, as framing feminine holiness, and as a woman’s/girl’s task.

4.3.1 Purity as Anecdotal

As argued previously, the published memoirs use metaphors to discuss the metaphoric language by which purity is taught. Klein writes of purity being taught using “generic metaphors and warnings” (p. 77). The metaphors of purity express how the rhetorical place of a women’s body and a man’s capacity to emotionally care are contested as spaces in which purity and impurity are negotiated. While the man negotiates purity and wards of impurity through socially
imagined relational and spiritual spaces, women’s bodies as material space become a symbolic place in which borders between purity and impurities are mapped.

Metaphors of purity—whether generic or specifically tied to a symbolic concept of body and bodily relationship—were the immediate answers participants recited when I asked, “What is purity?” Participants described their personal purity (rather, the goal of purity) being explained by their physical and spiritual body being compared to an item signifying cleanliness and pricelessness. From a pearl ring, white linen cloth, to a flower or rose, participants described that if they conducted themselves in impure ways, they would become a damaged ring, a stained cloth, and “trampled” or “picked” flower. Participants vividly described events in their youth when an adult compared women’s impure bodies to a torn paper-made heart, a chewed piece of gum, or a messily squeezed toothpaste tube. Both Klein and Brooke expressed how women’s bodies being described as a possible “stumbling block” by which they are responsible for men’s desire. While Klein remained tied to her teenage body being seen as a stumbling block, Brooke explained that the metaphor of a “stumbling block” set a standard for her as she thought about how to relate to men. Paige described going to a Passport-to-Purity event as a teenager and watching a skit in which a man and a woman stood on stage each holding half of a wooden heart. However, as the skit unfolded, the man’s heart remained intact as he waited for his “wife,” but as she walked across stage to find him, she turned towards other men carrying chisels and hammers, each taking their turn altering her wooden half heart. By the time the woman reached her “husband” on the other side of the stage, her wooden heart looked tampered, splintered, and discolored next to his perfect half. Paige explained that with different types of “weapons [being] used against her half heart,” the “wife” turns to her husband yet “it’s going to be a less fulfilling marriage.”
This example and others that the participants described focus on the women’s body as a symbol of possible impure reaction. As Blair (1999) writes, the rhetorical use of symbols represents a meaning “beyond themselves” and references larger domains (p. 19). The symbolic metaphors used to explain women’s purity were violent and captured imagery of assault and ruin. A spit on Oreo, a trash bag with torn holes thus unable to function, a rose trampled upon, and more, displays women’s purity as something to be taken away—whether violently or through the deemed unwise haze of desire. Aliza went as far to express that purity is essentially a “scoreboard of [a woman’s] sexual activity.” When asked if purity metaphors were used only to symbolize a woman’s body, only one participant referenced a metaphoric teaching of purity that centered men. Unlike the other metaphors and their focus on a woman’s body, Evan explained how impurity was taught as something that messed with a man’s emotional capacity in a relationship, not his body. Evan explained how his father told him that for every woman Evan engages in intercourse with, he attaches a “heart string” to her. By the time the man is ready to marry his wife, his heart has been spread thin as he has had to “take care” of other women and his “heart strings” are spread thin. Participants could not directly define “purity,” but each participant shared a story of purity being taught through metaphoric language.

In her memoir, Hammon writes of falling in love with purity discourse as it helped her with “navigating as a young woman…the sexual and emotional minefield” (p. 14). For Hammon, purity’s focus on her body as place originally helped her let go of bodily concerns she had as a young woman. Similarly, Klein and Finch’s overwhelming drive to secure “purity” was initiated by a health concern. While Klein navigated symptoms ultimately leading to a Crohn’s disease diagnosis and Finch struggled with self-harm and high levels of anxiety, Hammon explains that her being diagnosed with HPV signified a “delusion that God is uniquely disappointed with me,
that I’ve been singled out for God’s wrath” (p. 16). With purity’s construction of their body as place in need of pureness, the memoirists saw purity discourse as offering them relief from their physical ill-health. Each memoirist saw their health diagnoses as a significant turning point as it led them towards purity discourse and its metaphoric value placed on their body. Beyond purity’s construction of what constitutes a healthy sexual body, its discursive positioning of the white woman body raises questions of boundaries and where a pure body exists beyond issues of sexuality.

4.3.2 Purity as Intersectional

Purity is not a discursive concept used to teach modes of “pure” sexuality, but as Moultrie (2017) reminds us, purity positions itself as a state of being in which individuals must either maintain or attain, depending on their social identities. The discursive reality of purity discourse placing the body as needing to negotiate the maintenance or attainment of purity is further exemplified by how participants named purity as an intersecting classification system. Thea explained that to maintain purity, one must monetize their spiritual self. They went on to explain how they were taught that “lower socioeconomic classes” were more susceptible to states of being “ungodly and impure.” While class was not always explicitly pulled into teachings of purity, Thea explained how money was layered into sexuality, gender, and body as purity is “all encompassing.” Purity’s stake on body and body types was further described by Thea by purity discursively situating body type as a signifier of one’s spiritual character. Several participants spoke of this being a theme within purity. Thea explained that bodies read as “healthy” and “unhealthy” were classified based on the teaching of one’s “body being a temple.” Brooke spoke of married and unmarried bodies being marked differently due to purity. She explained that as an unmarried body, her bodily knowledge of sex needed to be seen as “ignorant” whereas, Brooke
stated, “if I was married, you could talk to me about [sex].” Elane expressed this concern by explaining how purity enforces “a certain way of relating to the opposite sex.” Even outside of sexual relationships, purity discourse situates class and bodies so that certain intersections of one’s identity implicates their level of “purity.” Olivia explained how the intersectional system of purity became “multidimensional” in her life and called purity “a form of control” in what types of relationships—whether romantic or not—she should be having and to what degree.

While each participant describing purity as overarching, multilayered, and a form of control identified as white, it is important to question how purity—in its attachment to whiteness—maintains intersecting issues of power and dominance. This notion, while not religiously focused, was explored in Warren’s (2003) autoethnography in which he questioned how his white body and the bodies of his students fell into purity-based ideas of social control within the classroom. Purity’s focus on the body, portrayals of whiteness (DeRogatis, 2015; Warren), and concepts of contagion (Douglas, 1966; Shotwell, 2016) therefore goes beyond questions of sexuality and practices of sexual intercourse that Klein, Finch, and Hammon’s memoirs focus on. Purity maintains an intersectional approach to power and dominance, but with a deeper spiritual emphasis. As Becky explained, “You are taught that [purity] means a lot of different things because you have to be pure and godly and holy for the Lord.”

4.3.3 Purity as Feminine Holiness

Speaking to the deeper spiritual emphasize purity discourse accentuates, participants described how purity discourse focuses on questions of women’s modesty in order to sell a concept of placed feminine holiness. SG explained that “modesty rhetoric kind of lies under purity rhetoric” and that lessons of modesty were more easily “imposed” due to their characteristics being more visible and read by others outside the woman’s body. Brom explained
how as a young boy and man, he was taught to watch a women’s level of modesty since “purity” was “a term that was feminine.” Caleigh similarly expressed how modesty was the scale used to test her own purity and that of other women. She explained “staying pure in media consumption, staying pure in sexual activity, staying pure in the way you dress, how you present yourself” was to present your level of purity. Allison argued that purity was the name for the act of women “keeping yourself clean and holy” and “protecting yourself.” Purity discourse uses the external performance of modesty to position feminine bodies as capable of “purity” or susceptible to “impurity.” Hence, modesty becomes a rhetorical border placed upon the body to signify purity or impurities. Purity discourse situates this border as essential in safety since the body is susceptible to impurity through immodest performances. What is read as immodest leads women away from the ability to attain holy status—whether of self, spirit, family, community, church, or nation. Therefore, purity discourse situates the feminine body as having no clear space to be freely embodied. Instead, the space in which a feminine body can be pure is through the concept of modesty and holiness as these enact themselves upon the body as place.

4.3.4 Purity as a Woman’s/Girl’s Task

Purity discourse teaches individuals to understand purity as a woman’s task to create boundaries. These boundaries are sold to “protect” women from lust or men’s desires. However, as the participants expressed, the boundaries encouraged were not to keep women and young girls apart from men, but to keep women and young girls bound to concepts of purity itself, away from the nuance of human relationship and identity. Not only is the feminine body constructed as place in need of purity, but purity itself remains the woman’s job. By keeping pure and following rules of modesty borderlands, her body becomes the status quo by which whiteness and purity are performed and understood.
As participants expressed earlier, purity is taught towards women and positions itself as offering lessons towards women, issuing boundaries for women to enact, and policing acts of self-pleasure. Purity was not merely a discussion with only women in the room, but it was a discourse issued at women in a space in which men too were present, watching and listening. Erica went on to explain, “[purity] was never a discussion for the men…it was only [directed] to the females.” Caleigh even explained that her own definition of purity revolves around its direction at women’s bodies. She said, “it is very sexist and outdated set of rules…to prove or outwardly express holiness or our identity and our ability [as] women and girls.” Olivia explained how boundaries did this by teaching women to create the boundaries themselves. She said, “decide right now your boundaries of how far you're going to go and how pure you're going to be or whatever…You're supposed to draw this line where that's going to be your line, that's going to be your boundary.” Erica explained that it “is always very clearly stated that you know you need to have a boundary and [not to] let anybody cross your boundary.” But as communicated in these instructions for boundary-making, women remained “responsible for making sure people don't go too far” because the woman must “clearly communicate what [her] line is.”

In addition to woman-centric lessons and boundary-enacting, participants who identified as women and all three memoirists described “saving” themselves as including any act that would be deemed “sexual.” This included self-pleasure and other acts of sexual exploration. Elane explained this was paramount as any self-guided experiences of pleasure went against “saving your virginity until marriage.” Additionally, by staying away from sexual exploration, the woman is tasked to “not tempt the other gender into promiscuous thoughts until marriage.” Alison described this “saving” of the sexual self as about saving “yourself for God.” Not only is
the woman responsible for “saving” herself for marriage, but she too has to save her exploration of her sexual self for her husband’s doing and ultimately for God. Participants who identified as men answered differently. Both Brom and Evan explained that purity for them meant regulating their pornography consumption, and for Brom, to position his desire for women, not men. For women, purity is used as a task for them to refrain from sexuality in general for the purpose of their future husbands and God. For men, however, purity is not a task, merely a warning. Allison explained, “purity [for women] is saving yourself for God and having healthy relationships and boundaries with people and not being irresponsible as a woman.” Purity positions itself as a task to be continuously monitored by women for others as it is attached to the materiality of their body. For men, however, to be pure is to patrol their sexuality for themselves—thus purity refrains from the materiality of the man’s body. As we dive into purity discourse further, I continue queering participants’ and memoirists’ stories to understand purity as a mechanism for white womanhood.

4.4 Purity as White Womanhood

Within the memoirs, each author narrates their story through a white, cis-gendered, and heteronormative lens focused on their sexual body and turning points in their post-purity process. Whiteness, or how purity issues whiteness, remains unnamed. However, as Moslener (2022) and DeRogatis (2015) argue, purity culture does not entail merely a fear of sexuality and sexual nuance, but with racial nuance. Purity discourse invokes imagery of white womanhood to display progress and how purity can be placed and understood. Hence, I explore how purity discourse codifies whiteness and xenophobic sexuality by using white womanhood as a place of purity practice. In doing so, I add to Moultrie (2017) and Natarajan et al. (2022)’s work which exemplifies that purity scholarship has remained tied to researching and centering white stories.
In my critical analysis, I queer our understanding of white womanhood so that we understand it as a rhetorical touchstone of purity through the usage of White women bodies and the trope of the Good White Christian Woman.

4.4.1 Usage of White Women Bodies

As DeRogatis argues, in purity discourse, sex remains highly consequential with the focus on the woman’s body receiving the man’s body and being a physical site of impure transaction. The focus of the body does not only provide purity discourse a space in which to orchestrate its order, but post-purity stories continue to revolve around the body. Both Klein and Finch focus their religious purity trauma syndrome on the concept of their own “virginity.” From our interviews, the participants spoke of purity using their white bodies in more dynamic ways. For one, participants spoke heavily about being warned of the male gaze. Jenny and SG talked about how they were taught from a young age to cover up. Becky, Aliza, and Thea spoke about being trained to physically hold their body in such a way to be seen as “submissive.” Becky explained further,

You have to dress a certain way. You have to be modest. You even have to be careful of how you behave, of what you say. You have to present yourself in a very particular way as a female, which can mean being subservient, meek, and quiet, and never put yourself over a man, always taking one down when it comes to another man. Everything that you do is to support and garner up a man. I mean, we mitigate their sin by the way we behave. After being sexually assaulted by the lead pastor of her church, Hammon writes, “I tell myself to respect the pastor’s authority. To keep quiet and stay in my lane” (p. 116). In her memoir, Hammon visualizes her own white woman body as the artefact needing negotiated when in the same space as the pastor. This usage of the white woman’s body as the upmost desirable object
needing negotiation is used in teaching material as well. Klein writes of being in a church
mission trip’s mime. She describes being cast as “Sex”. She explains, “my role was to silently
seduce ‘Christian’ with my body” (p. 39). Aliza told me that as a white woman, “You are taught
to cover up and that you are responsible for other people.” Jenny described how her mother’s
purity teachings made her hyperaware of her own white woman body. She claimed, “I know [my
mother] wanted to protect us, but she made me paranoid about men looking at me.” Moslener
(2022) argues that purity culture centers white women and their bodies for two distinctive
reasons. One, centering white women’s bodies encapsulates a particular brand of gender and
gender roles. The woman’s body is the place in which her gender and purity is performed. Two,
centering white women’s bodies continues to uphold respectability politics. Through
respectability politics, women of color negotiate their own sense of morality in the face of racist
and sexist purity discourse (Moultrie, 2017; Pitcan et al., 2018). Not only is their body the place
in which their gender is performed, but it is compared to ways by which white women’s bodies
perform gender and purity. As Ramler (2022) puts it, purity culture is a white political religious
movement in which brown, Black, and bodies of color are demarcated and sexualized. In doing
so, purity discourse discursively uses white womanhood to assimilate non-white women and
keep all women within purity hyper fixated on their bodily performances and responsible for the
maintenance (for white women) and the attaining of (for women of color) purity for the sake of
white male-protected community.

4.4.2 Good White Christian Woman Trope

Another rhetorical strategy used by purity discourse to codify whiteness and xenophobic
sexuality is through its constant branding of the Good White Christian Woman trope. Essentially
this trope encapsulates a “pure” woman. Klein writes, “In the evangelical community, an
‘impure’ girl or woman isn’t just seen as damaged; she’s considered *dangerous*. Not only to the men we were told we must protect by covering up our bodies, but to our entire community” (p. 4). From post-purity stories looking back on purity teachings, purity discourse frames a Good White Christian Woman as someone who remained abstinent until heterosexual marriage, understands that their sexual identity comes from heterosexual marriage, and continues to choose to be pure since men cannot choose purity in the same way. All participants who identify as women and the three memoirists center their whiteness as they explain how their body is used to signify the Good White Christian Woman.

When describing what her and her friends were taught through purity teachings, Olivia said that a Good White Christian Woman could “spew hate” and “cheat on [a] test” but as long as she remained sexually abstinent until marriage, “you were a good Christian woman.” Jenny said that for the longest time, she “was very bought in.” She claimed she “wanted to be a good Christian girl.” She claimed this was difficult because “growing up, it was a hard balance because you still wanted to be attractive and kind of cool or whatever” but the “weight of other people’s expectations and what they would put on you” required Jenny to abstain from any sort of sexual self-expression. Klein argues that purity teaches women that abstinence is not just about waiting until marriage, but that abstinence—of any kind—is a source of protection from impurities. Hence, purity positions women’s sexuality, the state of their sexuality, and even the expression of their sexuality as their only worth.

A Good White Christian Woman must also continuously choose to be pure since men are in positions where their purity is not regarded as negotiable. Erica told me of a time when she was in her church’s youth group as a teenager. During the service, another teenage girl in her group was brought up to the stage and given a microphone so that she could “confess” to her
boyfriend cheating on her. Even though he was the one having sex with another woman that resulted in a pregnancy, Erica said this teenage girl was the one having to publicly renegotiate her purity since her relationship resulted in an impure situation. After recalling this, Erica stated that the trope of a Good White Christian Woman requires women to submit to the idea that “men can’t control themselves, but women have the choice to be pure.” Allison, too, spoke of this saying that evangelical purity “zone[s] in on the girls and ask[s] us to make sure we’re doing our part.” She went on to say that as a woman, “you have the responsibility of glorifying God through how you represent yourself.”

The trope of the Good White Christian Woman seems to be the only way in which women within purity discourse can garner respect from their male-as-protector community. Hammon argues that women continue to play a role in this trope due to it acting like “Stockholm syndrome.” She writes of the “willingness of evangelical women to uphold the system that represses them.” As her memoir charts her experience of playing a role as a Good White Christian Woman, Hammon writes, “I’ve done my fair share of upholding that system. It’s that willingness in me—and in other women—that keeps the system afloat. I’ve made a career from it. Until now” (p. 172). All in all, and as Klein argues, Purity requires a woman to stand out in a culture of social nuance, meaning, she must resemble a cultural identity of sameness and following the order of the Good White Christian Woman trope. Purity-as-discourse racializes purity by emphasizing the overarching role of white womanhood. We see this in how white womanhood is codified through the usage of white women’s bodies and the portrayal of the Good White Christian Woman trope.
4.5 Purity as Disembodiment

In her work, DeRogatis focuses on the heterosexual binds in evangelical sex discourse that often go undetected, assumed, and unchallenged. Through my continued queer analysis, I aim to add to this by seeking ways by which the heteronormative sexuality placed on women’s bodies contributes to a disembodying experience thus allowing purity to orchestrate the body as place in need of purity. From this specific coding process, five themes emerged. Participants and the memoirists hinted at constant and ongoing experiences with disembodiment, the “light switch” phenomenon, purity discourse weaponizing girlhood, internalized guilt as a turning point in the post-purity process, and purity situating control within the site of the family.

4.5.1 Constant Disembodied Experiences

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke of still lingering experiences of disembodiment, even in their post-purity bodies. Olivia described how even as she is comfortable with her sexuality now and has been in a post-purity process for the past seven years, she said “all of a sudden it just hits. And I’m like, ‘why am I starting to feel weird and off and uncomfortable with being sexually active in this relationship?’” Klein writes that while she “had left the evangelical church,” purity’s “messages about sex and gender still whirred within my body” (p. 7). This disembodying experience the participants and memoirists conceptualize is often framed as a “disconnection” (Finch, p. 66) formed from an early stage with purity discourse. This disconnection works to isolate the woman from other avenues of knowledge so that she remains rooted to a specific puritanical belief system. Finch explains,

As a young child, I was required to engage with and give account of bible verses telling me that my own flesh was something to be fought against, resisted, and put to death. And if holy scripture told me that my own flesh was solely something to hate, to vilify, and to
blame then the body that it covered—my own body—was someone I could not and
should not ever attempt to relate to, understand, or love. (p. 27)

Participants had a wide breadth of descriptors for this constant disembodiment. Aliza claimed this disembodiment still “lingers” and causes abrupt questions aiming to result in her feeling “shame about my sexuality.” Becky explained that constant disembodiment is caused by how “neurological pathways are just paved.” She went on to say, “When you’re raised that you are meant to belong to a man” this “does a lot of damage to your identity and your autonomy, you don’t get to be a real person.” Participants described it as a “hijacking” or an experience of their true self being “stolen.” Alison stated, “the whole purpose of my life was to glorify God. And so, to leave that, I didn’t know what my identity was and what to do…like what now?” Becky described that in the constant experiences of disembodiment, she has to “glue back, paste back, piece together some semblance of what my sexuality actually is.” This constant experience of disembodiment aligns with Ramler’s (2022) concept of purity trauma. While men are taught that their thoughts may be pure or impure, women themselves and with their bodies are taught they may be pure or impure. Thus, they are continuously disembodied by a purity discourse telling them to refrain from impurities.

4.5.2 The Light Switch

Participants described a particular type of disembodiment through the phenomenon of women and their sexual bodies being treated as a “light switch,” able to turn off sexuality until they are married and need to flip it back on. This concept—while not always named as a “light switch” is featured heavily within purity scholarship (Gish, 2018; Houser, 2021; Moultrie, 2017). Klein writes of this “light switch” being a “tightrope strung between two opposing sexual expectations” (p. 139). The “light switch” disembodiment directly brings the women’s sexual
body into question as it is forced to perform in direct opposites in relation to a heterosexual marriage. Anna claimed that her body being taught to perform as a “light switch” has “made me really uncomfortable with my body.” She explained being taught that “you should not think about any sexual organs ever other than until it is time to have children.” Once married, “then you’re magically supposed to know how everything works then, and everything’s just going to click and it’s all perfect.” Kiera also framed the “light switch” as something akin to “magic.” She argued, “you’re not supposed to have any thoughts about somebody and then when this magical day happens, then all of a sudden you could have those sexual thoughts.” Aliza said that sex inside of heterosexual marriage was taught as “really awesome,” yet she was not given any sex education. Because her sexuality was supposed to flip, she told me she was confused when her sexual experiences during the first few months of her marriage resulted in both pain and pleasure. Becky described this “light switch” as being taught that sex is something women are only able to think about in conjunction with belonging to another man. She said, “you can’t just turn your sexuality on when it’s been repressed for so long.” Purity-as-discourse situates the woman’s body as site of purity and impurity being contested, therefore, her experiences of disembodiment are thoroughly related to her experiences with her body, gender, race, and sexuality. In addition to this physical disembodiment taking shape in the space of her body, the deeply held beliefs she has grown up with continue to cause disembodied experiences.

4.5.3 The Weaponization of Girlhood

Many of the stories Klein tells start from memoirs of girlhood. While some do, many of the stories do not revolve around specific instances of trauma, but rather, tell the story of purity discourse being normalized and then erupting once women reach womanhood. Klein writes,
Based on our nightmares, panic attacks, and paranoia, one might think that my childhood friends and I had been to war. And in fact, we had. We went to war with ourselves, our own bodies, and our sexual natures, all under the strict commandment of the church. (p. 8)

From their stories shared in our interviews, my participants’ post-purity narratives show a common thread: the experience of their girlhood was weaponized by purity discourse. This means purity latches onto bodies and self-knowledge from a young age. Because of this, to separate from purity is a difficult endeavor to say the least. Jess explained that on top of secular cultural expectations placed on women and young girls, sexual agency is difficult to garner, especially when it is “added on top of years of religious guilt.”

The weaponization of girlhood was used in two distinctive ways. It messes with queer girlhood and creates breeding ground for body dysmorphia. Klein shared a story of an interviewee who, when exploring her own sexuality as a young girl, was discovered, and demonized by her family and church. Both Emma and Thea described their childhoods seeped in purity discourse not allowing them to see their sexual exploration as queer, but as immediately “sinful.” Instead of growing up exploring sexuality and queerness, these individuals expressed a disconnect as their sexual exploration did not bring into question the idea of a future husband, therefore, it was not worth exploring.

During our interview, Paige stated that she sees “a pipeline from sexual purity to body dysmorphia.” When asked to elaborate, Paige explained, “there's a thing about being ashamed that you have a body and then being very confused and disturbed about your own body, and that may be affecting body image or whatever.” Becky accused purity discourse for not providing her the rhetorical “tools to even recognize that I have a body, that I have autonomy, that I have rights
to my own body.” She explained, “my body was something that exists for my future husband, and it exists needing to be carefully protected so as to not make another man stumble.” Similarly, Alison stated that through purity discourse she was “taught that I am just a little fragile human, and I am just a body that God uses basically.” Participants spoke of there being a disconnect between them and their bodies their entire lives as they were taught that sacrifice as women is “for the betterment of God’s kingdom.” This lesson reached them in their childhood years and messed with concepts that girlhood needed to address. These included menstruation, queerness, sexuality, friendships, parental relationships, and overall, sex education.

### 4.5.4 Internalized Guilt as Turning Point

While one of the main questions I asked interviewees was about turning points they experienced in their ExVangelical storylines, an emerging theme from my queer analysis messes with the concept of a turning point. This emerging theme displays how several turning points within post-purity experiences are steeped in concepts of internalized guilt. These turning points were not always clear, not always clean cult, and seem to require retrospection to recognize their value in a post-purity lifestyle. Klein writes of an interviewee and herself recognizing their feminist beliefs slowly and having to “confront” them. Similar to Hammon’s narrative overall, this notion of recognizing one’s feministic values parallels coming out narratives—albeit messily due to entrenched purity discourse.

Jess described slowly recognizing her discomfort with her evangelical language. She stated, “I can remember that very, very distinctly feeling so guilty and that being like, well this is how you’re supposed to feel.” Looking back on this turning point, she explained, “all the things that I witnessed growing up really affected the way that I came into being a sexually awakened young woman.” Jenny recalls looking back on a pair of tropical-print shorts she wanted to wear
as a young girl. However, her stepmother claimed they were “too short” for Jenny to wear and be “appropriate.” Jenny explained, “it was the first time that I became aware of having shame around what I was wearing.” She went on to explain this as a turning point by saying, “that's always what I think of when I think about the original sort of idea being planted in my mind of what you wear matters and there may be people looking at you.” Aliza described a turning point with similar material involved: a bikini. She told me of a time when she was a teenager and wanted to wear a bikini with her friends to the beach, but as she began to dress, she thought to herself, “I’m going to just turn [into] fire because I’m wearing a bikini.” She described having a panic attack and unable to go to the beach with her friends. She went on to explain,

[Purity] makes you ashamed of your body…. And it was really confusing because you know are getting this message in church that everything outside of marriage is so shameful. Touching yourself is shameful. Having other partners is shameful. There's just so much shame.

Thea explained this turning point rooted in disembodied experiences made them choose between a binary. They described having to choose between their “human experience for Jesus” or “Christianity.” Choosing “Jesus” based on knowing what they felt was legitimate allowed Thea to break away from the theological doctrine built into evangelical Christianity and purity discourse.

Brom explained that the breaking away from purity discourse is such a disembodying experience in and of itself because of the narratives evangelical churches use. These narratives paint people who leave as “lost or confused or in some kind of depressed position.” Brom argued, “the narratives that the church is telling itself and telling their members is harmful and harmful to harmful both to themselves and also to the relationships that they have with people
Participants’ stories and Hammon’s memoir directly reflect a “coming out” narrative in which they have to messily disentangle themselves from purity discourse. The internalized guilt baked into these turning points require post-purity individuals to continuously embark on feelings of disembodiment as they try to leave.

4.5.5 Familial Control

As argued in the previous chapter, ExVangelicals experience a particular divorce from their family when they attempt to leave evangelicalism due to its centrality in family structures. In the final emerging theme related to experiences of disembodiment in a post-purity process, participants spoke of breaking away from purity requiring them to break away from purity’s discursive binds within their families. This is due to purity existing as a form of familial control. The family structure is used to fortify the belief of submission to God. Hammon writes, “Though we humans may not understand it, we’re supposed to trust that God knows what God’s doing” (p. 107). While the “trust” that Hammon speaks of stems from family, the family is used to deliver individuals to God’s judgement. However, God’s judgement is often located in the church. Klein writes that purity discourse teaches parents that the perspective of the church (as God’s representative) must be trusted more than their own parental perspectives. Therefore, parents must trust the church more than their children. As participants discussed purity discourse’s disembodying rhetorics, they spoke of their family being site of purity, but a majority of it stemming from their parents’ churches.

Thea explained that since they were raised in a family that “was extremely sheltered,” they did not have access to knowledge outside of their family and church structure. For years, Thea’s idea of how to live their life worked in one direction. Becky explained that the church her parents raised her in “kind of forced parents to raise their kids a certain way.” This “way,”
according to Becky, fostered an “environment where your authentic self can’t be present.” Anna described this familial-based control within purity discourse as stemming from the parental belief that parents want afterlife insurance for all their children. As a pastor’s kid, Anna explained, “you [as a parent] want all of your children to be serving God, so that you’ll see all of them in heaven.” When she explained her reasoning behind not attending church anymore, Anna described not feeling “like I need to do anything to prove myself to anybody to be who I [am].”

From the participants’ narratives, we understand purity discourse as assembling an experience of disembodiment that rhetorizes the body as place in need of purity. As participants described experiences of disembodiment with their sexuality, childhood, guilt, and family-based control, their stories allow us to see how purity discursively treats the body as place and as a site needing clear boundaries between purity and impurities.

4.6 Purity as Panic

Alongside purity discourse and its utilization of metaphoric and disembodying language to latch onto the feminine body as place, purity also messes with spatial awareness of panics. From this specific coding theme, purity was positioned by the participants as prevailing through two forms of spatial panics. From their performance of purity, participants described two types of panics: the panics of hell and disownment and the panics of a deserved reward.

4.6.1 Panics of Hell and Disownment

Klein writes of purity teachings offering an obstacle which trains individuals to believe that if they are “pure,” then God will bless them. Therefore, if purity teaches this concept, then it silently imposes the opposite belief; if you are “impure,” then God will curse you. To tease this unspoken rule of purity, I explore what the consequence of impurity might be for the post-purity
participants. The participants explained hell and family- and church-based disownment were their largest fears if they were caught in acts of impurity.

When it came to the fear of hell, participants overwhelmingly spoke of this being a prevalent fear of growing up in American evangelicalism and purity discourse. Evan stated that if someone is not read as “pure, they are condemned” and left his explanation at that. When asked why purity discourse was used in her church and family, Erica took time to answer before saying, “I don’t know. I really don’t. I think it’s just another method of fear. I think they’re trying to keep people afraid.” Aliza even shared a story of her panicking about her clothes (and the use of modesty to measure purity on women’s bodies) as presenting her impurity to others. She explained, “I would start panicking if my scoop was a little too low on my neckline…I would just be panicking and like, oh my gosh, I'm a sinner. I’m so impure.” When asked what her fear with being seen as immodest stemmed from, she said “hell.” While Brom did not have to worry about physical presentation of purity, he told me of his father sitting him down and saying that Brom would be better off “dead than gay.” As a queer man looking back on his childhood, Brom stated that purity taught him to equate his liking of other men to an internal preparation for hell. Brom stated, “that fear quickly settled down into how unfair it felt that the only solution was to die.” Like Brom, Elane explained how ExVangelicalism gave her an opportunity to let go of the idea of hell in terms of her and others’ sexualities. Becky explained that purity discourse was a constant influx of “reminders about hell and sin and all of the dos and don’ts.” She stated that while she is in a post-purity process and does not subscribe to purity teachings, “having that kind of inner belief that I'm not good. I'm not good enough unless I do this, this, and this, and then the creator of the universe will deem me worthy. That system of thinking is what really messed me up, and I'm still undoing and unwiring a lot of that.” Several other participants explained that this
concept of God watching them, ready to strike them, or deem them worthy or unworthy of heaven was a large undertone of purity discourse and directly relates to panics regarding their place in eternity. Becky spoke of this being a lesson so “deeply rooted” that not only does one need “to breathe it in your head,” but one must also “work it out in the rest of your body.”

While hell was a spatial panic purity discourse provoked, participants also spoke of the fear of disownment in more localized spaces as causing panic. Interestingly, the memoirists, with their focus on themselves, framed this panic merely within the physical and mental health of the body. Klein wrote of her Crohn’s disease symptoms and eventual diagnosis as framing her fear that “if you are suffering, it’s your fault” (p. 51). Finch focused on her mental health, writing, “I felt lonely, afraid, depressed—I plummeted deeper into cycles of self-harm that had offered themselves to me as pain-avoiding compulsions” (p. 54). Hammon wrote of her STI diagnoses being a moment of purity panic. Each writer framed their panic over purity enforcing a rule of disownment was centered on their body being disowned by its own abilities, disabilities, and health.

Interestingly, Hammon also wrote of purity forcing her to remain silent about her experience with sexual assault. I read this as stemming from a panic in which she did not want to upset her husband and/or force herself to step down from her job in the church. This panic displays Hammon as fearing the possibility of her being disowned from spaces of belonging: her husband and her church. Similar to Hammon, many participants spoke of purity perpetuating a fear of being disowned by family, community, and church. Olivia described her opening up to her mom about her sexual relationship with a non-marital partner, in which her mother responded, “Well, that just means that you trust yourself more than God.” Olivia explained how this response would have caused her panic previously, but now it reminds her of how stilted
purity discourse presents sexuality. Jess told me of when she was eight years old, and she found 
out her older sister was pregnant while in high school. Jess described being “super brainwashed” 
and “telling [my sister] ‘I guess you’re just going to go to hell.’” When I asked her why her 
parents and her were panicked about her sister’s pregnancy, Jess explained that looking back, it 
was because of their family being placed in a small town. She said, “I think for my family and 
my parents, it was less about the religious aspect and more about the social aspect. If people 
found out, what would they think?” Kiera told me about the first sexual relationship she had with 
a man in which he was open about verbal consent. As he would ask her if his actions were okay 
and if she was comfortable with him, she explained that she still felt “scared.” I asked her what 
her fear was about, and she stated, “It wasn't scary because I didn't want that necessarily. But it 
was more like I'm trying so hard to not sin, to follow God and to not either go to hell or at least 
have disapproval from family and friends in my community.” Kiera explained that the physical 
act of sex, her body, and the physical presence of her family in her mind caused her to internally 
process her desire for their approval. Anna’s story of her parents responding to her being placed 
in the “impure” category did not revolve around sex or sexuality. Several years ago, Anna 
committed herself for suicidal ideation and depression. She did not want to put her parents on her 
personal visitor list, but felt she had to, and when they visited, “I got exactly the response I 
thought I was going to get,” she said. She described both her parents claiming that to be “cured,” 
all she needed to do was “have better faith” and “pray more.” Anna said her dad then brought up 
a time from her childhood when she had prayed, and God had “answered [her] prayers.” He said, 
“Remember that five-year-old and who she was and have faith—her childlike faith.” This 
panicked Anna as she realized, “it mattered more what they thought about my salvation or if I 
would get to heaven” than her own mental and physical health.
As Klein reminds her reader, purity discourse tells individuals that it must work, and if it does not, something is wrong with the individual. Purity-as-discourse seeps into individuals’ beliefs that any interaction, relationship, or community they partake in could easily be stripped if their impurity catches up to them. Thus, post-purity individuals see purity beyond issues of pre-marital sex or modesty, but as a discursive mechanism pushing them to panic about the space of their body through the possibility of hell and disownment.

4.6.2 Panics of Reward

Purity panics do not only use panics regarding placement of the body and its belonging, but purity discourse teaches individuals to strive for a reward. Purity no longer becomes the thing or state individuals want, but the reward brought from it is issued as a necessary thing to obtain—thus, creating a panic. The reward most spoken of during our interviews was the idea of pleasurable, safe, and respected sex being an award for maintaining purity. Elane claimed that the act of “sex is on this massive pedestal, the giant reward for all of your efforts in keeping your purity.” The reward was not only the ability to partake in this romantic notion of sex—the same by which Klein implicates in her own romantic post-purity journey—but it was also in the ability to speak freely of sex. Participants spoke of how sex and sexuality is kept quiet, but once several participants either married, or knew someone who had, sex becomes a conversational topic unlocked. In similar fashion to the “light switch” metaphor, Brooke described this concept as going from “red light to green light.” Both of these examples illustrate the sudden change women have to be able to engage with sex and sexual topics. This ability though, is not granted through agency, but is seen as a reward given to women based on their handling of their own purity.

By exploring purity-as-discourse, purity is understood to use panic in effort to incapsulate individuals to its process, order, and language. Unlike the published works from Klein, Finch,
and Hammon, the participants verbally processed the reasoning behind their purity panics. What the participants feared was more than the safety of their physical body, but they feared hell, disownment, and desired sexual agency—even in its limited prescription.

4.7 Purity as Macrocosm

Guided by Morris’ (2007) application of queering, I continue to center participants’ stories, but queer our understanding of purity discourse as a public, macro-communicative construction that dictates how bodies must be read in relation to purity. From this analysis, not only does purity intimately impact the individual and their personal concept of sexuality, but purity discourse can be understood as curating distinctive gender roles in relation to relationships. Purity discourse situates the feminine body as needing boundaries between impurities and purity. In this way, her body becomes place whereas the masculine body must curate pure space. His body enacts codes of protection from impurities while the feminine body is (re)bordered in pursuit of being a place of purity (Cisneros, 2011). I present this argument through five emerging themes from the data: woman and self, man and relationship, heteronormativity and purity, relational maintenance, and defense.

4.7.1 Woman and Self

When asked how the concept of purity was taught, Brom answered quickly by saying, “purity was something that I wasn’t expected to manage or anything like that.” After a second, Brom followed with, “But my sister was constantly hammered with purity talk.” Brom then described watching his father tape a sign to his sister’s bathroom mirror on which “I’m worth waiting for” was printed. This example from Brom’s childhood is representative of this emerging theme. Oftentimes, purity culture is examined for its unique impact on women and their bodily understandings. However, by taking a discursive approach, I argue purity discourse positions
women to play a specific role. Women are positioned by purity discourse to maintain and officiate the borders that keep their bodies in place. Therefore, they must too be the enforcers of fluctuating borders. According to Brom, purity discourse places an “expectation” on women “to manage” themselves. It situates the woman as needing to regulate herself for the sake of her husband, family, and wider community. Purity does this through two meta-themes: women’s’ orientation towards being wives and women’s self-pleasure not being part of wifehood/future wifehood.

Participants who identified as women spoke of the act of “keeping pure” including their own patience and longing for a future husband. Olivia told me that as a young girl, she would write letters to a hypothetical future husband. In these letters, she would write, “I’m waiting for you. Are you waiting for me? I hope you are. I’m praying for you.” When Brooke spoke of doing something similar, I asked her what her motivation was for composing such letters to a hypothetical future husband. She answered, “I think [as a woman] we have that kind of weird value placed on [us] until [we’re] in a relationship, then it shifts.” Elane explained that within purity, there “was always the sense you should save all of everything about yourself for your husband.” For Elane, this included expressions of sexuality, spirituality, and even emotions. When I asked Erica to expand on this, she explained that the natural growth from girlhood to womanhood and personal sexuality was framed around the woman locating a husband. She said “realizing that you’re a sexual human being” was punctuated by women’s “yearning” for a husband to help classify her own sexuality. Hence, participants’ stories of their sexuality centered their possible wifehood and the transition of their body being the body of a wife.

Alongside post-purity women recognizing their sexuality being discursively tied to their bodies as potential wives, participants spoke of their own pleasure being questioned. Klein writes
of going to a Christian bookstore and finding five books about masturbation. In the books addressing masturbation for men, she claims they define masturbation as “bad,” but that men’s obsessive shame over masturbation is just as harmful to them and their relationship with God. Klein writes, “these books talked a lot about the individual’s health and the health of the individual’s relationship with God” (p. 128). However, the books addressing masturbation for women, focused on women’s self-pleasure ruining their future marriages and the relationship that they would have with their future husband. Since masturbation leaves pleasure in the control of the woman, she “robs her future husband of the pleasure of giving her an orgasm without her stepping in and telling him what she likes” (p. 129). Moving beyond Klein’s analysis of these books, the very notion of women’s self-pleasure being mapped on her body was heavily discussed in the interviews. Each time she pleasured herself, Elane described feeling like “I’m essentially trash.” When asked why, she explained, “In my mind, me having an orgasm is the equivalent of me having sex because that’s the height of what sex can be for me.” DeRogatis (2015) writes of evangelical Christian sex manuals being very open about sexual pleasure, however, for women, the sexual pleasure has to be at the hands of their husband, whereas his sexual pleasure can exist in a myriad of ways, ideas, and performances as long as it exists in his marital bed. In their own exploration of pleasure, purity discourse situates women’s bodies as being caught between pleasurable (for the sake of husband and raising family) and cast as sinful (for focusing on self and body). Alison explained that if this line was crossed, “it is always the girls’ responsibility and if something [sexual outside of husband’s role in the marriage] happened, the girl did not stay pure.”

Hammon writes of purity orienting women towards sexual “self-denial.” She explains, “[purity] is a set up for abuse and neglect, with a convenient religious motivation.” By purity
discursively situating women and women’s pleasure as a one-dimensional service to husbands and families, women’s vocalization of sexual preference and safety is made obsolete. Brooke explained how she and her ideas of sexuality were compared to her brothers’ performances of sexuality. She told me of her brother being shamed by her parents for visiting a pornography website on their family computer. While Brooke’s brother’s character was not brought into question, his actions—being painted as “failure”—were questioned in front of the family. She explained that she would avoid anything dealing with her own sexuality and ideas of pleasure because “failure, to me, I’d seen it, it was public.” She explained further by saying that if she was caught, not only would her actions be questioned, but her ability to perform as a pure woman, saving herself for her husband, would be as well. She stated,

I don't want to experience [that] I've failed. I don't want other people to know. I don't want to confess. But then also, I want to be this desirable female that some Christian boy falls in love with me, and we get married. So, it's this weird balance of shame…I want to do this thing so that I can get this reward because this is what I've been told I should want my whole life, and this is what my life should look like.

This double-edged consequence to women’s self-pleasure does not only entail non-married women. Paige described her experience with being divorced and staying at her parents’ house during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since she was in her 20’s, Paige stated, “I was still young enough to be getting the purity rhetoric.” She claimed her parents reverted back to the language they used before her first marriage, warning her to stay sexually “pure.”

Understanding purity discourse allows us to see its emerging theme of casting women in the role of safekeeper. As both Brooke and Paige’s stories exemplify, this safekeeping remains tied to woman as wife—whether they are a wife, have yet to be a wife, or have been and no
longer are a wife. Therefore, purity functions macroscopically as it dictates women being integral to their husbands and refraining from performing agency in themselves.

4.7.2 Man and Relationship

In her memoir, Finch defines purity as “god esteem” (p. 26). She goes on to explain that to be “pure” is to be “godlike.” For women, as established previously, godliness was found in the physical performance of modesty and holiness. However, when it comes to the masculine body as place, memoirists fail to capture purity’s use of men’s bodies. For men, purity and godliness was defined as the ability of the man to be the protector of his relationships and the spaces in which his relationships are constructed. The man’s body is not mapped as place in need of purity. Rather he must exist in a space of authority. Brom described purity as ingraining gender roles classified by “the responsibility for protection and being protective.” He went on to explain, “women were to be protected and men were to protect, which also means that women were not to protect, and men were not to be protected.” As interviews continued to be conducted, I wondered what exactly men were protecting. Beyond the physical “safety” of their wives, it seems purity discourse situates men as needing to be protectors of the relationship in general. Women had to protect themselves from their own sexuality whereas men had to protect the relationship they have with their wives.

Kiera explained that men-as-protector was taught early on as she believed “if you’re going to want to get married” you must “let the man pursue you.” Evan stated that he was taught to pursue his future wife with pure intentions as “you want [the woman] to be as pure as they can be because otherwise essentially your marriage is going to fail.” From Evan’s story, the man’s purity is not based on his sexual desire but is centered on his locating of and establishing a relationship. Brom told me of his father setting him and his brother aside and saying, “if either of
you turned out gay, I’d cut your head off so that you wouldn't go to hell.” Brom explained that for men, the purpose of purity was in the procurement of a heterosexual, male-headship family. The “struggle” was not with Brom and his sexuality, but rather, the “struggle” was with whether Brom would become a husband and protect his wife and family.

While women had to navigate the silencing waters of self-pleasure, men’s experiences with self-pleasure were a regular topic centered in evangelical spaces. Du Mez (2020) writes of events hosted by men and for men in American evangelical churches. These events (also known as small groups) encourage men to regularly meet and discuss their roles as husbands, fathers, and men. Usually using battle, war, and even crucifixion rhetoric, the discourse within these meetings emphasizes men needing to grow in their role as protectors by regulating narratives of sex and the protection of familial purity. The husband and father of each family takes on the role of purity protector. But before a man is a husband and father, he exists in this rhetoric as it attaches to his sexuality. In our interview, Brooke spent a bit of time trying to decipher this. She brought up her father, a pastor, running one of these men’s groups in which they focused on pornography and sex trafficking. I asked her if these were two separate themes or one in the same. She immediately answered that pornography and sex trafficking are lumped together since “from the Christian perspective, you shouldn’t view pornography because there could be human trafficked people in that pornography.” Because of this, Brooke said the narrative of pornography and human trafficking was always “skewed.” Other participants explained that for women, pornography and masturbation were tied to the woman and her sexuality. For men, however, pornography and human trafficking were tied to the man failing to be a protector. His sexuality was not questioned, but his consumption of any potentially unethical pornographic material meant the man played a role in harming the purity of any women portrayed. Brooke stated this
“goes back again to this idea that women, their value is tied to their purity. So that value being stripped from [the woman] is even more inherently wrong and even more inherently a crime against them.”

From the interviews, the participants recounted stories in which purity discourse does not always show itself through distinctive performances (purity rings, pledges, father/daughter balls, etc.), but seeps into the mundane of their youth- and adulthood. From the coding of men and relationship’s role in purity, we understand that a man’s purity is performed through his role as protector and upholder of “God’s esteem,” thus similarly stripping him of his own agency and sexuality. Because a woman has to regulate herself and her sexuality and a man has to regulate his consumption of pornographic material and the ethics involved with self-pleasure, the woman’s body then becomes a site of ethical and unethical behavior, whereas a man is the regulator of such ethics.

4.7.3 Heteronormativity and Purity

The third theme that emerged from this specific code illuminates how purity-as-discourse heteronormalizes bodies and bodily relationships. Klein writes, “It is worth remembering that ‘purity’ is a proxy for ‘sameness.’ Whether we are talking about sexual purity, gender purity, racial purity, ethnic purity, or religious purity, we use the term purity to refer to ‘keeping out’ or even ‘cleansing’ humanity of diversity” (p. 78). Participants spoke of heterosexual, racially invisible marriage being the only marriage discussed, represented, and encouraged. Participants described there being an unspoken expectation for them to marry someone of the opposite sex and then experience instantly pleasurable sex. Both SG and Brom spoke of being confused by the contradictory pro-sex rhetoric. While purity discourse references sex and the concept of it being pleasurable for both parties, its broad definition of sex only included married heterosexual and
able-bodied sexual activity. As a queer woman, SG felt strategically ignored. She explained that “it was pretty much taught that I was just expected to marry a guy and sleep with that guy because that's the only way that I was allowed.” Both Brom and SG explained that outside of heterosexuality, their sexuality would be “pure” if they remained celibate.

The “sameness” Klein writes of purity pursuing becomes apparent as participants, in their post-purity, process the discursive parts built into what is deemed pure and impure. Purity discourse, in its pursuit of sameness, decontextualizes sexuality in the name of heteronormativity and sets up heterosexual marriage being a saving grace. As Moslener (2015) argues, the concept of heterosexual marriage is used as a political position to round out the ritualized identity of evangelicals. Purity discourse situates (unspoken) heterosexual marriage as the ultimate “purity practice” as marriage formulates gender roles, sexuality practices, and national identities (p. 153). During our interviews, participants spoke of heterosexual marriage being the ultimate goal of purity offering physical safety. After being assaulted while on a date with a man while in college, Paige explained that her mother and the campus ministry she volunteered with blamed her for being in this situation. Paige described how she could not go on dates because of her family and friends painting her dating life as promiscuous and unsafe. She attempted to solve this by rushing into a heterosexual marriage as they hoped her marriage would be “the solution.”

Brom described being taught to funnel his emotions as a man onto his wife. When he was younger, he was told that as man, “you're going to want all these types of things and that's normal and fine. Get you a girl. That is, find a good wife that is able to push back against that and calm your raging emotions.” Brom described his father as using his mother to regulate his emotions and “to give him an outlet to feel these softer emotions.” Brom then went on to explain that his father also used his children to regulate his emotions as well. Brom’s mother was seen as
someone who gave her husband his children so that Brom’s father could have “non-romantic loving relationships.” In the safety of a heterosexual marriage, Brom’s father was given children who could provide their father “friendship, non-romantic love, feelings of community, of fellowship, of camaraderie.” And in the safety of this marriage, Brom’s father had direction for his emotions and Brom’s mother had a distinctive role. As Brom described, her role was “basically to turn those spigots of emotion on and off for men.”

SG told me of her going to a Bible camp when she was in high school. As an openly queer woman, she described feeling watched and judged by many people at the camp. I asked her if anyone said anything, and she answered that there were two parts to their judgment. First, “they were really upset that [the camp] was allowing a person to publicly be like, ‘I’m gay,’ and admit it out loud and live in that identity. They did not like it.” But on the flip side, SG stated they remained quiet by agreeing, “‘it’s okay, she is totally going to pursue holy marriage.’” As a polyamorous pansexual woman married to an asexual man, SG explained that her fears of needing to establish safety in a heterosexual marriage still stick with her. She told me, “still in the back of my mind, sometimes I question, is my marriage okay? Is this bad?”

The binary between heterosexual marriage and celibacy has a clear and distinctive line presented through purity discourse. According to Kiera, heterosexual marriage was the first choice, but if that did not work, “you’ll at least go to heaven having lived a pure life and be rewarded in heaven even if you don’t get married on Earth.” Kiera told me about being a teenager and reading Dannah Gresh’s And the Bride Wore White (2012), an autobiographical purity book marketed for young evangelical women that tells Gresh’s love story of being married when she was in her early 20s. Kiera explained how Gresh’s wedding night with her husband was described as, “he scooped me up into a warm blanket and kissed my head, and he’s like
‘God has blessed us with this sexual gift.’” Kiera described reading this and thinking, as a young teenager, “I can’t wait for my husband to do that.” She explained that purity discourse sells teenagers this idea that they are going “to be rewarded with an amazing spouse.” Not only does one’s “amazing spouse” promise sexual pleasure, but safety within the established confines of heterosexual marriage, since the alternative is enforced celibacy for the sake of purity.

4.7.4 Relational Maintenance

While purity discourse situates women as needing to regulate their personal sexuality and men needing to protect the relationship, purity discourse simultaneously tells women that they need to maintain the relationship with their husband. While the husband protects the relationship from outside threat, the wife maintains the inner workings of the relationship. SG explained this relational maintenance, being intertwined with pornography, is placed on women’s shoulders specifically. She said, “dudes got talked to about pornography and [women] got talked to about making sure that our relationships weren’t unpure.” Kiera described being excited as a young woman due to her “high sex drive” and thinking “I’m going to make my husband so happy and I’m going to have a great marriage because I’m not those other women who don’t want to have sex or whatever.” For Kiera, her personal sex drive was positioned as a tool to use in the maintenance of her future relationship. Jenny explained that for her, she was taught that her role was “to keep [boys] in check” because “boys will be boys” and “we [women] were the gatekeepers for the boys.” Becky explained that these types of lessons prevent individuals from learning how to interact with others. She said purity’s teachings of relational maintenance and women being in the position to “belong to a man and be somebody’s wife” is “going to affect how you relate to other women…how you relate to your children.” She went on to say, “It
certainly makes you unable to have any foundation of skills to begin a romantic relationship, whether a serious one or a fling.”

Purity discourse urging women to ensure their relationship through their own maintenance fuses the women’s personal purity to that of the marriage’s purity. Brooke explained this by saying,

It's not just your purity, but it's the purity of your marriage. So, it's not just you. You're tied to this other person now, the perfect union or whatever, and now it's you [who has] to meet the standard of what your husband has said, or your husband is going to stray, and then your marriage won't be pure.

As Moslener positions marriage as the ultimate role for evangelical Christians, these participants spoke of their own relationships and marriages being contested as sites by which their impurity could be questioned.

4.7.6 Defense

In the final emerging theme detailing what purity-as-discourse entails outside of sex and gender, purity stands as a defensive weapon used within evangelical spaces. Jenny described the “we all sin and need to be forgiven” rhetoric as a sign of purity discourse that circumvents accountability. In doing so, who the victim of abuse is becomes swapped and the perpetrator is then re-narrated as a victim of allegations. Jenny described a situation at her previous church in which the pastor was accused of abuse. He gave a sermon focusing on the biblical story of the “adulterous woman that the Jews brought before Jesus.” She claimed his usage of the biblical story was to reposition himself as the victim and in need of protection from the young teenage girl who had claimed he had abused her. With his purity (being the protector) brought into question, he accuses the young women of being impure as she messes with the relationship
between himself and his church. Emma equated purity to the act of hiding scandal and Evan explained that purity discourse seamlessly hides abuse as it is “the easiest way to categorize people.” He claimed that if an individual “did something impure, it’s like, well, they are this type of person, and you can put them into a certain box.” Using similar symbolism to border rhetorics (Cisneros, 2011), purity discourse diminishes nuance so that each situation has a clear victim and perpetrator with borders drawn between the two roles. In doing so, the head of purity must always exist within the category of victim as they continuously battle the threat of impurities (Shotwell, 2016).

In the final pages of her memoir, Finch writes, “I have learned to celebrate my sexuality, my identity as a woman, my female body, and all of my individual and specific personality nuances involved in being the strong woman I have always been” (p. 97). In doing so, Finch speaks of her experience and focuses on how her white cis-heterosexual body specifically carries purity discourse in a post-purity process. Yet, her memoir remains manufactured, linear, and aesthetically told. After reading Klein, Finch, and Hammon’s memoirs, one is expected to quickly recognize purity discourse, but only after visiting its harm through white women’s narratives which portray post-purity as a completed process once one’s trauma is recognized. As the structure of these memoirs’ public discourse is messed with, we see how each author attempts to precisely point out purity. By exploring purity-as-discourse, I do what McKerrow (1989) urges critical rhetoric scholars to do. I provide a glimpse into the relationship between power and seemingly normal discourse so that we move beyond the precision of simplistic notions of purity. By queering purity narratives as both public discourse (Morris, 2007) and a particular genre detailing ambiguous (un)becomings (Cruz, 2019; Sullivan, 2003), I position purity as discursively impacting larger discourses of gender, sexuality, and race. Additionally, I
rhetorically scrutinize purity’s impact on both intimate and public concepts of bodies as place and space (Hawhee, 2006; Moreland, 2019; Selzer, 1999). This approach is vital as purity masquerades itself as spatial discourse, using metaphoric language to focus on youth, preach anecdotal warnings, and frame itself by focusing merely on women’s safety.

From a queer lens, I reorient our understanding of post-purity as discursively involved and fractured. As Cruz and Sullivan remind us, in the space of fracturing, discursive differences can be productive. The participants and their narratives do not always follow the publishable layout of Klein, Finch, and Hammon’s memoirs, but they communicate how purity discourse functions through metaphors, as centering ideas of white womanhood, as forms of disembodiment, as panic rhetorics, and as macroscopic concepts of identity. All five of these themes speak to purity’s prerogative in codifying whiteness and xenophobic sexuality. Regarding the liminality of post-purity, in this chapter, I investigated how ExVangelical stories display a persistence in naming purity and reengaging with purity so that I may continue to explore how ExVangelicals work towards a possible rhetoric of impurities through the excavation and encountering of purity discourse.
CHAPTER 5

Towards a Rhetoric of Impurities: ExVangelical Narratives of Excavating Purity to Encounter Impurity

At the very end of her final diary entry, Paige writes, “So. How to maintain a sense of self in all of that?” Her diary is full of story after story tracing her frustrations with the power and infiltrative quality of purity discourse throughout her faith, sense of self, relationships, family, communities, and country. While our interview provided rich insight into her narrative as an ExVangelical wrestling with purity-discourse, her diary adds a layer in which she becomes the theorist, co-constructing a theory to help us, who exist outside her story, to see the translatable importance of ExVangelicalism and our own experiences with purity discourse. From Paige’s and other participants’ diaries, I reconstruct their narratives—stories stated and written—so that we may explore the possibility of a rhetoric of impurities as we learn what it means to excavate purity to encounter impurity. As I have set out to explore throughout this inquiry, I continue to examine concepts of both identity and purity through questioning a rhetoric of impurities and body as space. In previous chapters we have understood identity (such as ExVangelicalism) as multilayered and complex, and purity (ideologically, culturally, and discursively) as existing beyond gender and sexuality.

In this chapter, I analyze participant interviews and diaries to explore how ExVangelicals remember and trace purity through rhetorics of place, memory, and the body. In doing so, I expand on how ExVangelicals rhetorically excavate and encounter concepts of purity and impurity in order to create what I call a rhetoric of impurities. I argue, that through a rhetoric of impurities, ExVangelicals represent ways in which the impure body dislodges purity so that the body can exist as space.
5.1 Methodological Framework

This chapter analyzes the rhetoric of diaries and qualitative interviews to understand how ExVangelicals practice a rhetoric of impurities. While using their identity to rhetorically create space and place for their post-purity, ExVangelicals critique purity discourse as space rhetorically constructing the body as place in need of purity. From this knowledge provided by Chapters Three and Four, I explore how ExVangelicals respond to purity as space, treating the body as place through memory and storytelling. Therefore, my methodological framework for this chapter continues to be guided by rhetorics of the body as place as well as memory and the rhetorics of diaries as a rhetorical practice of recognizing and reconstructing.

To explore ExVangelical stories responding to purity, a rhetorical lens is needed. From the literature presented in Chapters One and Four, we understand that the body as space and place amounts to questions of embodiment and disembodiment (Moreland, 2019). While purity endeavors to place the body, draw borders of identification, and rectify these borders through panic rhetorics, a rhetoric of impurities disrupts this. As ExVangelicals discuss, process, and collectively share stories of purity culture, they provide embodied memory (Bowman, 2009; Spillman & Conway, 2007; Rambo, 2023). Through their stories, we see how the body continues to be “an important site” of memories as ExVangelicals trace how their bodies were taught to perform purity (Spillman & Conway, p. 82). By recalling how they experienced purity discourse, they recognize the ways by which their bodies are rhetorically shaped differently within post-purity as embodied space.

The tracing of ExVangelical memories can be traced in the rhetoric of diaries. Since purity discursively exists in both intimate and public spaces (spirituality, relationship, family, church, and the nation), ExVangelical diaries trace purity throughout these spaces. As diary
scholarship posits, diaries allow both the author and the reader to reflect on the private and public memories of the diarists (Bell, 1998; Harrison, 2003; Plummer, 2001; Sinor, 2002; Steinitz, 1997). Harrison (2003) argues the rhetoric of diaries helps us understand how diaries are constructed for an outside audience and Wilcox (2012) states diaries show how experiences are recalled as both traumatic and disruptive, yet mundane and part of the everyday. While diarists handle personal narratives, Plummer (2001) and Sinor (2002) posit that diaries provide a simultaneous flow of public and private events that bring both the writer and the reader into the present. In doing so, the singular experience of the diarist becomes a collective experience for the audience (Steinitz, 1997). Therefore, as I examine post-purity stories, I employ participant diaries along with interviews to capture snapshots of ExVangelicals’ simultaneous public and private framing of purity and post-purity as it happens through memories and current experiences.

Stories of excavating and encountering are vital to the study of how memories play a role in the deconstruction of purity. Diaries are filled with personal tales of fear, trauma, question, and hope. As Shotwell argues, a purity approach to fear and uncertainty is to classify and categorize in order to maintain order and safety through power. To practice an impure approach, Shotwell encourages readers to practice honesty and pinpoint mess in an effort to partake in “epistemologies of dirt” (p. 13). From Shotwell’s work, epistemologies of dirt entail storytelling and recalled memories in order to locate the lie of purism and redefine sites of harm. By using memory as a rhetorical tool, one nuances sites of purity, thus becoming responsive to purity discourse, resisting hegemonic ideas of purity and impurity, and moving towards a rhetoric of impurities.
In response to purity discourse, I envision ExVangelicals as excavating purity and encountering impurity, thus partaking in a rhetoric of impurities. I explore this through how ExVangelicals use memory and diaries to rhetorically discuss their experience with purity. Additionally, and as Shotwell’s work displays, this approach allows the subject’s narrative to be a resistive act and the subject themselves, thus allowing an audience to understand their positionality and their response to purity as embodied and returning the body to space.

To understand the ways by which a rhetoric of impurities is created and used to navigate post-purity, I employ critical qualitative participant diaries following their interviews (Jones, 2000; Meth, 2003). I draw on the combination of these data-gathering methods to explore the complexity of ExVangelicals’ intimate, mundane, and personal memories of untangling from purity discourse. After each interview, participants \((n = 18)\) were asked if they wanted to partake in a subsequent data-gathering process called a participant diary. Of the participants that were interviewed, 15 completed a participant diary. Diaries ranged from one to seven days of entries per participant for a total of 62 diary entries. Each diary (Appendix D) outlined clear directions for participants (Turner, 2016). Participants were guided through a series of prompts in which they were asked to reflect on how purity continues to be a concept they grapple with and the ways by which they respond to it in hopes of deconstructing. Participants were not prompted with the language of a rhetoric of impurities but were asked to detail their deconstruction of purity, as deconstruction is a term ExVangelicals understand and experience (Newheiser, 2019).

As argued previously, the usage of participant diaries creates space for the participants—as data diarists—to create their own theory: a rhetoric of impurities.

### 5.2 Participant Interview and Diary Themes

*Man, every day I sit down to reflect and write, I think, “What else could there be to say?” Then I start to think about purity and its impact on me, and it suddenly almost feels like*
too much to even break down...How do I really start to digest and break down the systemic oppression of my body and how it hindered my dating life, my marriage, and now my sex life? It's easy to push purity culture off as an aside of the harm Evangelicalism caused, but really, it's at the core of the harm.

-Aliza, diary entry day four

The diary entries emphasize the larger scope of purity discourse and its role in American evangelicalism. Aliza’s entry displays her processing how the recollection of her purity experiences and narrating her post-purity consciousness requires the act of rhetorical “digestion” and a “breaking down” of purity. The words used in Aliza’s entry paint a picture of what I argumentatively lay out in this chapter. Not only does Aliza offer insight into how a rhetoric of impurities uses the combination of excavation and encountering in the movement towards impurity, but she situates purity discourse as a larger discourse pertaining to American discourse, harm, and systemic oppression. From my specific coding of the interview dataset, five themes emerged. Participants spoke of purity as political and colonial; purity’s obsession with sin and sex; the practice of evangelicalism as pure and ExVangelicalism as impure; post-purity as an act of critiquing norms; and finally, participants spoke of their movement towards a rhetoric of impurities consisting of excavating and encountering turning points. Through the continued queer feminist lens (Cruz, 2019; Misgav, 2016; Piontek, 2006), I offer new ways of exploring post-purity by refraining from turning away from impurity, but instead asking how ExVangelicals use their state of impurity as a radical response to purity discourse (Shotwell, 2016). In doing so, ExVangelicalism—as a contextual example—helps us reorient ourselves towards the possibilities of a rhetoric of impurities.

1 Following the methodological practices of critical discourse analysis (Gill, 2000; Neumann, 2008; Titscher et al., 2000) and embodied data (Ellingson, 2017; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020; Thanem & Knights, 2019), I refrain from editing participant diary entries. In doing so, I aim to keep the data structured by the participants themselves and my critical interpretation of their language as fluid.
5.3 Purity as Politicization, Colonialism, and Whiteness

Something I thought about after the initial interview with regards to what evangelical means is the idea of the “good news”. With evangelical churches seeking to evangelize the world, spreading the gospel to everyone, I began to think about how far these churches actually are from spreading any sort of good news... What they said they were about wasn't actually what they turned out to be about. Their version of the gospel, one of control, is nothing short of colonialism and white supremacy. The idea that we must spread the gospel (i.e. gain new converts) is just a method of erasure and ensured systemic power and control.

-Becky, diary entry day two

Becky’s entry equates evangelical purity to colonialism in that it operates as a system formulating power and categories of being. This formulating of power was a theme brought up in interviews, but participants used three specific terms to define this concept. Participants described evangelical purity as an act of politicization, colonialism, and whiteness.

When asked to explain how she understands evangelical purity, Aliza explained that the evangelical “culture [is] now largely connected to a political party.” She stated further that an ExVangelical would then be someone “who left the system,” with the “system” being evangelicalism. Aliza argued that the reason ExVangelicalism exists is because evangelical purity “is so prominent.” She stated, “Our whole country is founded on this principle of godliness.” The political framing of evangelical purity allows ExVangelicals to understand purity as systemic and playing a prominent role in culture. SG described how her growing up in the U.S. Military, and her experience with foreign humanitarian work allowed her to see how infused evangelicalism is with U.S. rhetoric. She stated, “It kind of hit me…the realization of how wildly controlling the church felt like it needed to be over people…I feel like I saw a lot of the politicization [of the] church.”

Beyond purity as politicized, participants also described evangelical purity as colonial. Anna expressed that even “the background of how we tell the American story and that it was
people that came here for religious freedom as pilgrims…and how that has influenced so much of even how the country was created” creates a direct line between current understandings of evangelical purity and colonialism. She explained that being ExVangelical is “just stepping away from the narrative that [just] because you’re in a certain religion that doesn’t give you your birthright to take over other people’s areas of life.” Paige argued that evangelical purity has “a strong colonialism undertone” when she stops to think about both sexual purity and evangelical mission hood. She explained sexual purity as “a system of control or power or systems that allow in abuse” and that mission hood “is just accepted poverty tourism” designed to perform pure evangelicalism and position others as needing to as well. When asked why, Paige stated, “I think our interpretation of the bible or whatever is really through a probably flawed and very Western lens.”

Alongside its act of politicization and colonialism, participants described evangelical purity as having a white ontology. This theme enhanced Fekete and Knippel’s (2020) argument that to study American evangelicalism is not only to engage with white evangelicals critically, but to understand the white-ontology positioning evangelicalism as a cultural movement. When defining evangelical purity, Brom described it as a “movement for things like American exceptionalism and empire building and racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia.” He went on to express that “the methods of” evangelicalism “foster these phobias,” thus allowing power to be maintained. During our interview, Jenny described questioning her racial identity and whiteness. She explained that understanding issues with police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement was “a major turning point” for her. She described looking around at her fellow congregants of her church and thinking to herself, “These are not the people that I thought they were, and I don’t want to be these people.”
As Becky reflected in her diary, what evangelical purity says it is “about” is not “actually what [it] turned out to be about. Their version of the gospel, one of control, is nothing short of colonialism and white supremacy.” Through the ExVangelical movement, participants expressed their desire to critique the purity discourse within evangelicalism that centers on concepts of politicization, colonialism, and whiteness.

5.4 Purity as Obsession with Sin and Sex

I’ve been really thinking about purity and the church and how they have affected me. It may not be fair, but this is my journal. I’ll write what I like. Purity is poison…Purity poisons family against one another. It poisons friends against each other. Worst of all, purity poisons you against yourself. It makes you hate your body. It makes you hate your mind…It’s because of fear. It’s the same fear that caused the problem in the first place, just cycled through generation after generation. Every villain is a victim, in their own way. I’m so glad that I stopped drinking the poison.

-Brom, diary entry day five

Participants’ narratives tell stories of how they attempt again and again to explicate themselves from purity discourse. Unlike, and in addition to, my previous argument, participants framed purity discourse as spatial rhetoric in which post-purity individuals recognize and attempt to move beyond. As Brom describes this, ExVangelicals attempt to “stop drinking the poison” in which the poison he writes of is purity’s obsession with sin and sex. From the data, four themes emerged, displaying how purity works as an obsession with sin and sex. Participants spoke and wrote of how the term “obsession” operates as a process to control, how sin and sex are equated to impurity, purity’s positioning of a sexuality threshold, and how sexuality is constructed as a project, thus making purity a project.

5.4.1 Obsession And/To Control

This week there has been a lot of focus on evangelicalism in the media due to the release of another Hillsong documentary and the upcoming release of the Duggar/IBLP documentary. It’s interesting how the subjects of these two documentaries are very
There is a common thread of misogyny, racism, homophobia, narcissism, and greed in every evangelical environment, regardless of what that environment looks like aesthetically.

-Jenny, diary entry day three

I watched the FX Hillsong documentary on Hulu this past weekend. This quote from the former lead pastor Carl Lentz stuck with me about the church, “It can be a sledgehammer of pain.”

-Anna, diary entry day three

After interviews and during the period of participants keeping their diaries, two documentaries were released on streaming services. Amazon Studios’ “Shiny Happy People” (Crist & Nason, 2023) and FX’s “The Secrets of Hillsong” (Lee & French, 2023) are documentaries tracing systemic issues of purity discourse within specific and well-known evangelical spaces such as TLC’s Duggar family and the Hillsong church system, leadership, and brand respectively. Both Jenny and Anna reflect on these documentaries in entries to help pinpoint how purity worked as an obsession with sin and sex for the purposes of controlling sin and sex. These two entries describe the obsessive purpose of control through particularly gripping language. Anna, referencing a quote by Hillsong’s former head pastor, Carl Lentz when describing his being outcast from the church network, writes of recognizing the obsessive control of evangelical purity as a sledgehammer of pain. Jenny describes feeling hopeless as she realizes how controlling purity is in evangelical spaces.

The obsessive nature of purity and its use to control ideas of pure sex was a theme largely discussed in participant interviews. When asked about purity, Erica stated, “I’ve never really understood the church’s obsession with purity and tendency to just want to talk about it so much.” When asked what the obsession pertained to, Erica answered,
There was so much focus on your body and what you were doing with your body instead of focusing on serving others…I just wish we could talk about something else…we’re just talking about sexual sin right now. Why? It just seems like it was an obsession.

Brooke, too, spoke of how frustrated she was with how much purity was discussed in relation to sexual sin. She stated, “[purity] is supposed to be this private thing, but…it’s been like, ‘oh somebody’s struggling. This person’s struggling…’ If it’s supposed to be this private pure thing, why are we talking about it so much?”

Participants spoke of this obsession with purity being used to specifically control women and sexuality for larger purposes. Emma argued that purity is discursively rooted in the question of “who owns the land?” She went on saying, “I mean, it’s medieval…I don’t understand the point of [purity] other than it’s based in early capitalism, and it’s about owning someone in some sense.” Aliza described purity as an act of controlling people’s sinning. She stated, “The church has this obsession with not sinning as on your own and then controlling if other people are sinning or not…There’s this obsession with what is or isn’t sin.” Further, Aliza claimed that purity works as a “way to continue to exert power over its people. Specifically, its women and young girls.” She argued, “Purity has been used as a means of fear…we teach our children to be scared of sinning and we teach our children to be afraid of their bodies and afraid of feelings.”

Emma and Aliza’s argument help us understand how they visualize purity’s weaponization of the body as place. In doing so, purity disembodies the body causing mistrust and panic over the body’s performance.

Aliza spoke of recognizing her queerness and her bisexuality as a turning point in which she began to question “why the church is so obsessed with people’s sexuality.” Her locating ExVangelical spaces allows her to keep asking these questions. She stated, “I feel like maybe if
[the church] is that controlling of [sexuality], then maybe freedom with God could actually be connected to our sexuality.” When asked about why purity is used to control, Brooke spoke of her coming to an ExVangelical state, allowing her to ask similar questions. She described purity as a test to see how much control a person needed. Interestingly, Brooke stated that in a world that sees sexuality as fluid and nuanced, purity allows sexuality to be “tangible,” and thus controllable. She stated, “It is a tangible thing that you can seek to attain, and that’s also a tangible example of messing it up…it’s something you can attain.” In her diary, Anna wrote of the ways by which her parents’ relational output towards her focused on whether she was pure or not. Because of this, her parents remained obsessed with her ideas and performances of sin and sex. She ended her diary entry with a jarring line, portraying how purity, as a tangible form of control, cost Anna her idea of family.

Purity culture, and Christianity in general, made our parents’ love conditional. I’m going to have to sit with that for a bit.

_Anna, diary entry day one_

5.4.2 Sin and Sex Impurities

_A girl in my youth group had aids. She was only there for a few weeks, but the youth group leader quietly kept people away from her. We all knew she hadn’t gotten aids through sex but rather blood to blood contact with a relative. It didn’t matter. The ladies who helped with youth group treated her like damaged goods, like she was being punished by God for something. What kind of people treat little girls like criminals?_

_Brom, diary entry day one_

Beyond the concept of one’s purity being a point of obsession in order to control, participants spoke of particular brands of sin and sex being labeled impure, thus creating a rhetorical function to the words “impure” and “impurity.” From Brom’s reflection of the young woman in his youth group, he conceptualizes the ways by which girls are treated as criminals reflecting how they are deemed impure, as “damaged goods,” and “being punished.”
During our interview, SG explained that the paradox of purity and impurity, one being normal and the other being unattainable, created a threat of impurity that was never openly discussed. She described that to be deemed impure was to be labeled as committing “this special sin” that was “put on a pedestal and drilled a lot.” Aliza too expressed that the paradox of impurity was difficult to navigate. She explained, “It can be really uncomfortable cause you have to have uncomfortable conversations with family members who have no problem being like, ‘you’re sinning.’”

In order to stay away from the nebulous diagnosis of being impure or participating in impurity, participants described a panicked response. Paige argued that one must “flee from sexual immorality, which means you run for your life in the other direction.” She went on to say that she was taught to respond to any lustful thought by “aggressively remov[ing] yourself from the situation.” And if you were to choose to “[stay] in that moment, you’re sinning by having those feelings no matter what you’re doing.” Paige argued that this panicked response kept her in the mindset of believing that “I am bad.” Alison, too, expressed that getting stuck in the mindset of “I am bad” was a constant response to panicking about impurity. She explained, “If you did mess up, there’s a lot of shame involved.” Alison stated that “if you don’t have purity,” then you were deemed “dirty…you’re not clean, you’re not white, snow white anymore.” In maintaining or attaining purity, participants were rhetorically placed in a position in which they feared impurity, struggled with its own paradox, and ran from situations in which impurities could be introduced. However, if impurity was faced, participants’ concepts of purity were instantly tarnished as they wrestled with attaining a pure state.
5.4.3 Sexuality Threshold

It’s no wonder I struggle with getting dressed and struggle to feel wanted and beautiful. Because to be beautiful is to embody my feminine. To be feminine is to embody the concepts of sexy and sensuous. To be sexy and sensuous is to be a sexual being.

-Aliza, diary entry day four

Aliza’s diary entry helps us visualize the frustration she personally experiences with post-purity and her understanding of her own disembodiment through purity discourse. She writes of her sexuality being a point of obsession within purity discourse in an effort to position her femininity as needing to perform in specified ways. Her sexuality was treated as a place in which her performance as a sexual being had to balance two opposite standards: to be “beautiful,” “sexy,” and “sensuous,” yet being shamed for her body and sexuality. These standards presented a type of threshold that participants spoke of experiencing during our interviews. This sexuality threshold taught participants that their sexualities could be deemed pure if they balanced and remained put within a particular margin.

Thea told me about their experience attending an evangelical college during which they came out as gay. Thea explained that while the campus culture communicated to them that it was alright that they identified as queer, they described feeling watched by campus leaders as “they kept tabs on me, and they all talked to each other, so they probably thought that I hit a certain threshold.” Thea expressed their doubts about the campus’ acceptance of their sexuality when campus members communicated to them, “Okay, we’re comfortable with queerness as long as it’s not to this extent.” Thea said that once they started dating a queer woman on campus, the campus minister required Thea to attend mandatory bible studies. When Thea was not seemingly “converting,” they stated the campus attempted to “kick me out of [college]” and when this happened, Thea described it as a turning point in their ExVangelical process. They explained that being threatened to be kicked out of college for openly identifying as queer made them realize, “I
can’t trust these people. I’m only digestible to them in a very, very specific form, and that’s not realistic to who I am.”

While Thea’s story is a specific story tracing the process of meeting a sexuality threshold and then the consequences and broken relationships resulting from the threshold being surpassed, several participants spoke of this threshold requiring them to consistently second guess themselves and their sexualities. Evan explained that his sexuality was also taught to be seen within strict boundaries that do not relate to what he argued is natural to someone learning about their sexuality. He claimed, “You’re supposed to push those lines and boundaries, but it seems like the church has made that a hard rule to where you can’t even push it.” Emma explained that queer sexuality was painted as a metaphor for evil. She claimed that not only was “being gay…considered basically amongst the worst things you could be,” but that “homosexuals and murderers would be mentioned in the same list.” Thus, the threshold for sexuality, in Emma’s experiences with purity discourse, used manslaughter as the threshold in which to compare sexuality. As the participants’ stories communicate, purity discourse situates pure and impure sex within a sexuality threshold. This act requires individuals to constantly question, fear, and compare their sexualities to ideas of sin and shame, thus introducing experiences of disembodiment. As Moultrie (2017) and Moslener (2022) both argue, disembodiment becomes a harrowing act to deconstruct in a post-purity process.

5.4.4 Sexuality as a Project

I grew up in poverty, and having multiple bras wasn’t a possibility. My parents couldn’t afford it. Between 7th and 8th grade, I went up to a DD, so I no longer fit into bras sold at Walmart. We had to truck it 45 minutes to Sears or JC Penny. My mom would tug and pull the fabric and stuff and rearrange my breasts to ensure I didn’t have four boobs from not having a proper fit… I quit fighting, trying to quiet her about telling store staff her narrative of how inconvenient my breasts were to her budget. In college, I worked in Lane Bryant and was taught how to fit a bra properly. It’s nice to know that fact, but...I
still hear my mom’s voice...Each year I purchase new bras... more than one bra in rotation means they all last longer. The expense isn’t a privilege to me. It’s just a necessity for my daily existence.

-Anna, diary entry day two

The above entry in Anna’s diary struck me as she wrote of a normal and necessary clothing item being used as space in which her own purity was regulated. In the middle of the entry, Anna writes, “I quit fighting, trying to quiet [my mom] about telling store staff her narrative of how inconvenient my breasts were to her budget.” This line tells a story of an individual experiencing their body being treated as a project, a canvas in which purity must show up, be performed, and succeed. During our interview, while Thea was telling me about their experiences in their conservative family and on their college campus, they described knowing there were “prayer circles” praying for them, “but they’re actually just talking about you.” Thea expressed how this made them feel “very much like a project.”

This concept of being treated like a “project” as Thea put it, was largely expressed by participants. Evan and Anna explained that purity was a project in which rules of purity and pure sexuality were kept secret in hopes of individuals not experimenting. From “not actual helpful explanation[s],” as Evan put it, to what Anna called “creating shame” if you were “exposed to any sexuality of any kind” outside of marriage, purity was a project in which individuals had to disembody sexuality in an effort to remain tied to pure sexuality when they were married. Erica explained that sexuality being constructed as a project to “keep pure” was so central to her childhood and youthhood that the term “saving themselves” was the only pure task an unmarried person could carry out as they kept their sexuality pure. She explained that an individual’s sex life was well known—whether active or “lack thereof”—so that her evangelical community could keep tabs on people’s sexuality and how they treated it as a project.
Defining purity…Doing what is right. Striving for perfections. Blameless. Being "free" from lust, greed, selfishness, etc. The problem with that is "perfect" and "Right vs. Wrong" is dependent on who you ask.

-SG, diary entry day two

Treating sexuality as a project in which one’s sexuality is regulated and watched positions one’s purity as a project as well. However, as Evan stated in our interview and as SG’s entry above points out, the project of purity is non-definitive and relies on one’s sexuality and identity to be repressed yet known an in effort to be controlled.

With purity discourse’s obsession with sin and sex, we understand how post-purity individuals recognize this rhetorical trait through four specific tenets. One, purity’s obsession with sin and sex is understood as controlling sin and sex, as if sin and sex are a contagion, ready to break free (Douglas, 1966; Shotwell, 2016). Two, sin and sex were placed in the same category, therefore placing both topics on a binary of pure/impure. Three, sexuality was placed on a threshold in which individuals are taught to perform and participate in sexuality within particular constraints of acceptance. Finally, sexuality is conceptualized as a project, therefore making purity a project by which individuals have to follow distinctive rules and consistently disembody themselves as their body and sexuality become space to contest impurity. These paradoxical themes help us understand the ways by which purity discourse works sneakily as both an obsessive and well-known rhetorical function, yet slinks into the background and frames itself as the bedrock of American evangelicalism. Purity discourse becomes both known, yet unrecognizable, a heartbeat to evangelicalism’s obsession with sin and sex.

5.5 Pure Evangelicalism and Impure ExVangelicalism

To remain an evangelical, participants’ performance of their religious self would be pure, but to express themselves as an ExVangelical was to immediately settle into an impure state. From this theme, we understand that the positionality of an ExVangelical is one of impurity. The
fine lines of evangelical purity are questioned, deconstructed, and doubted by ExVangelicals, thus tearing at the seams of a pure religious state. This argument is further solidified by five emerging themes: the impurity of freedom; the impurity of outside evangelicalism; the impurity of hell; the power of purity; and an impure state.

5.5.1 The Impurity of Freedom in Self and in Relationships

today, i sat on a nude beach & only kept my bikini on because i was cold. i sat next to a nude friend. a man. he was attracted to me, but didn’t force anything. i felt respected and safe. this is normal living. this is the post purity cult life.

-Kiera, diary entry day one

Kiera’s short diary entry narrates a story of settling into the impurity of oneself at the cost of leaving evangelical purity. Her freedom with not only herself and her body, but in her relationship with another displays an embracing of an impurity of self and relationship. The concept of freedom was born from Thea’s and my interview when Thea responded to my question of what being ExVangelical means with, “It’s left so much freedom for me.” Elane too described being an ExVangelical as providing “this sense of freedom” that she longed for when she was younger. When asked what this freedom allowed, Elane stated, freedom “to be friends with who I want to love, who I want to not feel like I always have an agenda behind every relationship.” This “agenda” Elane spoke of pertains to how she often felt “the Christian pressure to be a certain way” with her friends and “anytime [I was] not, somehow [I was] just overwhelmed with the sense of guilt and shame.”

The freedom participants spoke of having in their state of ExVangelical impurity allowed them to see the difference between staying evangelically pure in relationships versus the freedom of ExVangelical relationships. Alison described how her relationship with family and friends who became ExVangelical grew when compared to when they were all committed to evangelicalism. She explained that as evangelicals, they were “most involved” and “committed
to the church” more than exploring relationships with others. But now that she and her friends have become ExVangelicals, they can freely explore relationships with one another outside of the confines and regulations placed on them within the church. Anna too described that her relationships with ExVangelicals helped her see that leaving the church is survivable. She said, “Seeing that it was okay, they survived changing their faith, and that’s okay” allowed her to see that “life goes on” and her becoming an ExVangelical could strengthen more relationships that cost her specific ones encouraged by the church.

Even outside of relationships, being an impure ExVangelical provided freedom for ExVangelicals to relate to themselves. Caleigh explained this happens because the ExVangelical identity itself is “not a one-size-fits-all kind of identity.” Therefore, being an impure identity allows ExVangelicals to explore their religiosity without identity-based guidelines. Aliza described the identity as one that “feels like freedom from oppression.” When asked what she means by this, Aliza continued with, “ExVangelicalism is really just finding freedom. You get to be a free human; you get to be an autonomous human being.” Elane stated that even being an ExVangelical allows her to explore her identity as a religious being more than she could when she was participating in evangelical purity. She claimed, that to practice the impurity of ExVangelicalism is “to believe in God, but without any religious constructs.” The impurity brought on by ExVangelicalism provides ExVangelicals a freedom to explore relationship with self and others from outside the confines of evangelical purity discourse.

5.5.2 The Impurity of Outside Evangelicalism

*I’m saying this to say, if getting raped causes ostracization and speaking in tongues causes a years-long family rift, what do you think the stakes are to leave the church completely? And the sick thing is that they’ll say the people who left were never real Christians to begin with.*

- Paige, diary entry day five titled, “The Cost of Leaving”
In her diary entry titled, “The Cost of Leaving,” Paige reflects on the panic evangelicalism has regarding the impurity surrounding the boundaries outside of evangelical spaces. The title itself represents the impossibility of the spaces existing outside of evangelicalism being deemed safe or pure by evangelical purity discourse. As Paige points out, while unsafe situations arise within evangelical purity, what is labeled as impure is the existence of one outside of evangelical boundaries. During our interview, Anna explained that to exist outside of the evangelical church was to choose an impure lifestyle. She said,

I was taught if you’re not in church, then that’s backsliding too. That’s just as guilty because being part of Christianity is part of being part of community and being in the church and attending is just as important as individual acts of faith.

She claimed that people who once attended evangelical church, but left were labeled as impure more so than individuals who never once attended a church service or became evangelical.

Similarly, Kiera described how her church used a “triad” of language to keep purity placed within the evangelical space. She claimed that metaphors of “heart, mind, and spirit” were used to describe the inner placement of purity within evangelicalism and evangelical practices. When asked what metaphor was used to position impurity in her church, Kiera claimed impurity was “the thing that separates you from God because you can’t be as close to God.” Thea described this situation as well. They claimed that they could have used their sexuality as testimony in evangelical spaces to help them navigate being queer and religious, yet there was “immorality” tied “to me being gay and the immorality of me living that out.” By living out their sexuality and not attending church, Thea’s designation of being outside of evangelicalism deemed them impure “and not doing the things that evangelicals do.”
5.5.3 The Impurity of Hell

Along the lines of impurity and immorality existing outside of evangelical spaces, ExVangelicals also spoke of how impurity was defined as hell and consequences as existing outside of purity. Following Thea’s story above regarding their sexuality working only within a testimony of queer-to-celibate and evangelically pure, Thea expressed that their living a “gay lifestyle” positions them as “immoral” in their parent’s eyes. They continued, “Because I am immoral, I have become so impure to [my parents] that purity and [Thea] are not even connected in their mind.”

Beyond sexuality, Kiera spoke of impurity being born from relational consequences. When describing the dissolution of her marriage, Kiera explained that she was blamed for the end of the relationship and that if the relationship broke down, her purity would be questioned. She claimed that the rhetoric during that time focused on the idea that “God will not be happy and your relationship with God will suffer, and you might suffer, and your marriage will probably be in trouble.” Not only would Kiera’s impurity impact her marriage, but her relationship with herself and with God—resulting in the largest relational consequence evangelical purity fears.

With sexuality immorality and relational consequences, participants spoke of the largest state of impurity being that of hell. While Chapter Four focuses a bit on how participants expressed purity’s panic regarding hell, I highlight here that hell is both a purity panic, yet it is a spatial rhetoric in which one’s state of impurity can be positioned. Jess explained that while purity culture taught her to fear sexual immorality, she feared most the prospect of not “spreading the gospel” enough that she would not be able to save someone from the consequence of hell. Elane too described how the fear of hell positioned her to speak of hell as the ultimate
state of impurity. But with hell remaining a religious constructed space, impurity remains a state that is unknown, feared, and positioned as highly consequential to one’s livelihood as Thea, Kiera, Jess, and Elane tell us.

5.5.4 The Power of Purity

at times I felt superior, which is embarrassing to admit now. I felt “more pure” and like I was winning at being a good evangelical girl. Even though I literally had my first kiss on the couch in the youth group hallway! Haha!

-Jenny, diary entry day two

Purity is positioned as power and as Jenny helps us understand, it is not only power accrued in evangelical spaces but even power through self-actualization and relational competition. During our interview, Alison explained that purity derives its power through its usage of shame. She argued shame is built into the structure of evangelical purity so much so that “the church…is really just shaming people.” Participants spoke of shame being weaponized to keep the lines between purity and impurity clear. Interestingly, with shame being used to clarify what impurity is, purity remains unknown, untraceable, and undefined as argued in the previous chapter.

When discussing the weaponization of shame in purity discourse, Aliza argued that ExVangelicals are naming this process of shame being used in an effort to “dismantle a power structure.” When asked what power structure she spoke of, Aliza explained that the ExVangelical movement has begun a social turning point in which “a lot of unhealthy power structures that have been established through the evangelical church…are being dismantled.” As these “tides are turning,” Aliza described seeing more and more post-evangelicals “leaving the church and speaking up about their experiences in the church.” After a beat, Aliza stated, “I think it feels like something much larger and on a broader scale is kind of happening.”

In my life, I think purity, evangelical Christianity, and abuse all intertwined. All of them were excuses for each other.
As purity discourse is being dismantled and questioned, ExVangelicals are remembering, recognizing, and telling stories of how purity uses concepts of shame to position its own power system. Intertwined, as Brom writes, with ideas of sanctity, purity discourse becomes an insidious discursive system in which individuals are presented with a paradoxical idea of sanctification and are positioned within purity as powerful or powerless depending on undefined ideas of purity.

5.5.5 An Impure State

From feeling far removed, losing a sense of purpose in relationships outside of purposive purity, and discomfort, to experiences of disembodiment, the identity of an ExVangelical and post-purity individual positions itself within an impure state. This impure state signifies a space in which ExVangelicals experience and process the tension involved with balancing striving away from purity, yet a fear of the consequences often assigned to purity. As Shotwell argues, operating from a space of impurity is often confusing and fear-inducing as it requires individuals to work with “dirt” and reframe how purity is often defined as the right way of relating. In other words, to operate from an impure state is to turn away from a colonized view of relationships. From the participants’ diaries, we understand how they visualize and express their experiences with decolonizing evangelical purity.

I consider myself to be far removed, but when someone on the outside (like [my partner]) gives input on this topic, it seems as if I am still in sometimes (accidentally and with such remorse). It is disheartening to hear things from my partner like this [e.g., a few days ago she described me as “conservative,” which felt like an insult], because I feel like I have changed so very much in the last several years, but it is a reminder that I will have to actively deconstruct and unlearn for many years to come.

- Thea, diary entry day one
Part of this impure state places Thea in a space in which they wrestle with balancing what they carry from evangelical purity, yet what they move towards in their post-purity process. Thea writes of feeling a particular aspect of impurity in the sense that they do not fit with evangelical purity, yet they do not easily fall into place next to their partner who was not brought up in evangelicalism.

_Not being able to go to the people I would before for help, because I know it would turn into a "you need to return to the church" intervention instead of support is hard. Walking through what is right and wrong within the intimate side of my marriage has been especially isolating, because I feel like non-ex-evangelicals would not understand where the ingrained doubts and pressures are coming from and those who are still evangelicals will just tell me that all my struggles are because I'm "running from God's plan for me."

-SG, diary entry day five

Similar to Thea, SG wrote of her ExVangelical state being an impure state when she reflects on her romantic relationship. During both our interview and in her diary, SG expressed how she struggles with lingering purity discourse as she and her husband navigate their queer sexualities within a heterosexual-passing marriage. SG describes the lingering effects of purity as isolating in which she wants to openly wrestle with her impure state as an ExVangelical yet finds it difficult to talk with someone whom this relational tension is normal or known.

_When I first really felt a big step away from the church at large I remember feeling like there was a blankness in my mind. That blankness was the absence of a grid or a flowchart of decision making and opinions that had been designed for me by the church... The blankness was uncomfortable and that’s why I wanted to replace it with my other attempts of spiritual practices. But I eventually got comfortable with not having a spiritual practice._

-Paige, diary entry day seven

ExVangelicalism is often felt as an impure state by the noticeable shift in spiritual and relational spaces. As Paige reflects in her diary entry above, transitioning from evangelical purity to ExVangelical impurity entails a loss of spirituality (ideologically, practically, and communally).
Paige and other participants spoke of settling into the impurity of ExVangelicalism by letting go of the drive to locate spiritual purity.

*It’s really hard to be disapproved of by my family. I never wanted to rebel. For a long time I hoped somehow there would be a revelation that all the conservative stuff was right so that I could accept it and stop being so difficult and rejoin the union of the family. The oneness my family must have. The church must have. The bible study friends must have.*

-Paige, diary entry day seven

Paige also wrote of ExVangelicalism being a state of impurity due to it being framed as an act of rebellion. While not explicitly so, ExVangelicalism may rebel against aspects of church, faith, family, and spiritual selfhood due to its nature as a radical response to evangelical purity. However, due to its nature as a rebellious response to purity, ExVangelicals experience a longing for unity with evangelical families. But as Paige points out above, the “oneness” she longs for with family and friends would require purity to be successful and positioned as right for everyone.

*Purity culture has given me a lifetime of being told my body was shameful and that I was bad if I ever showed my skin, all while being an incredibly kind, empathetic, intelligent person. It was a confusing message, and even as a grown, married woman with two children, I find myself struggling when I get dressed thinking, “Is this inappropriate for me to wear?” Wow that memory was buried deep and talking about it brought up a new wave of anger at the oppression of my body, simply for existing as a girl.*

-Aliza, diary entry day two

A striking theme within this dissertation regarding purity is how it disembodies and treats the body as place. While Chapter Four uses both interviews and published memoirs to help us understand this act of disembodiment, it is important to note that existing in an impure state—such as ExVangelicalism—provokes a recognition of disembodiment as well. As Moslener (2015) argues, purity creates a “moral economy” (p. 132) in which the ideology of moral exchange is connected to both morality and economic systems in an effort to maintain
evangelical engagement. Thus, participating in a moral economy requires individuals to disembary themselves and partake in purity discourse in an effort to shape an identity that succeeds in a purity system and exchange. As Aliza’s entry pinpoints, in order to participate in the moral economy of purity, she had to disconnect from herself and her own body. However, as an ExVangelical, wrestling with post-purity, she consistently recognizes the disemboring nature of purity discourse. Therefore, the ExVangelical identity allows individuals to be positioned within an impure state as they untie themselves from the economic drive of purity.

5.6 ExVangelicalism and a Rhetoric of Impurities: Themes of Excavating and Encountering

*And when I think about me, I feel like I similarly ended up in really bizarre, controlling, and insane environments because I didn’t have normal boundaries, normal self-esteem, normal space to explore normal developmental things, nor did I have normal role models.*

*Paige, diary entry day three*

While it is important to examine the unique rhetorical functioning of the ExVangelical movement and the ExVangelical identity, it is vital to understand ExVangelicalism as a vehicle for comprehending the value of impure rhetorics. As this chapter lays out, ExVangelicals respond to evangelicalism as a religious model for purity by orienting themselves within an impure identity and post-purity movement. As Paige’s entry above depicts, evangelical purity will always mold itself as a normal response to the chaos of cultural shifts. Therefore, to rhetorically shift away from purity and exist in a state of impurity, ExVangelicals recognize and reorder the ways by which purity was fed to them within evangelical spaces. To move towards a rhetoric of impurities, ExVangelicals must wrestle with purity as normalized discourse. In the following sections, I present this argument by laying out the theoretical framing of a rhetoric of impurities using ExVangelicalism as an example. In order to recognize (excavate) purity and reconstruct (encounter) impurity, ExVangelicals critically engage with purity as a seemingly
normal social discourse. From here, ExVangelicals then begin to excavate sites of purity and encounter impurity to locate ways by which a rhetoric of impurities is needed for non-panicked notions of existing. Hence, to understand a rhetoric of impurities as evidenced by the ExVangelical movement, I provide three themes: the critique of norms, excavating purity, and encountering impurity.

5.6.1 ExVangelicals and the Critique of Norms

From the example of the ExVangelical movement and its radical response to evangelical purity discourse, I argue that a movement towards a rhetoric of impurities first requires individuals to critique social norms. As Shotwell argues, critiquing the norms of purity requires a mentality of “many yesses” (p. 19). Interestingly, ExVangelicals exemplify taking this approach by participating in a cultural critique of norms to open themselves up to practices of impurities. To do so, ExVangelicals move away from the individualized nature of purity (Moslener, 2015; Shotwell, 2016) and say “yes” to ideas that purity discourse teaches individuals to respond with “no.” Hence, for ExVangelicals to participate in a critique of purity norms, they must ask questions of how purity discourse impacts individuals collectively (as this chapter has laid out) and reposition themselves within the mentality of saying “yes” to questions, doubts, and new ideas relating to purity and impurities. This happens through five steps: critiquing ideas of comfort, recognizing expectations, naming hurt, exploring the fluidity of identity, and questioning acts of exclusion and inclusion.

The first step in critiquing norms is questioning ideas of comfort. Alison argued that to question the norms of purity is to question one’s comfort with what purity teaches one about their community. She explained if someone is discussing community involvement and she is worried they might be taking a purity-focused approach (wanting to rectify what is deemed impure), she
explained that asking direct questions will help her figure out if she is “comfortable with the choices that [they] are making [about] their community.” Thea explained that questioning one’s comfort with ideas of purity is vital and that their identity as an ExVangelical allows them to “feel more comfortable questioning…and not just taking information and feeling okay with it.” These ideas of questioning one’s comfort with evangelical purity allow ExVangelicals to critique the collective impact of purity discourse and say “yes” to honoring their sense of comfort or discomfort before following purity scripts.

The second step in critiquing norms is recognizing and naming the expectations placed on individuals within evangelical spaces.

For as long as I can remember, being part of Christianity was simply expected. Several influences seemed to keep this expectation alive—having ‘morals’, living in the south, and the lack of knowing what else there could be besides Christianity are example influences.

-Caleigh, diary entry day one

Caleigh’s diary entry allows us to see layers involved with one’s expectation to participate within evangelical purity. For Caleigh, these layers include the question of where one’s morality came from, regional identity, and lack of diversity in thought and practice. During our interview, SG explained that the difficult nature of critically engaging with purity discourse is due to the expectations that evangelicalism places on individuals. When asked what she meant by expectations, SG answered that expectations were “layers to what you’re expected to believe as an evangelical…[you] just kind of inherently go along with because that’s an expectation the church has put on [you].” SG went on to explain that a major step as an ExVangelical is to recognize expectations by stopping and “asking [yourself] for a second” if alignment with evangelicalism is a “layer of expectation” or part of what one’s believes and wants to practice.
Caleigh and SG vocalize how they critique the norms of purity by recognizing expectations placed on them and providing themselves freedom and to move beyond these constraints.

The third step in critiquing norms is pushing back against evangelical rhetoric and naming the hurt evangelical purity discourse caused. Erica stated that being an ExVangelical allows her to “actively push back against being associated with [evangelicalism] because I was for so long and I was hurt so much.” In her diary entry, Brooke wrote of pushing back and naming the hurt she experienced intimately and in relation to her body as space.

_I have no science to back this up but I think modesty and purity culture made me more aware of my body image. And because I was constantly thinking about my body I was constantly criticizing it. Why did my boobs have to be so big, I can walk around braless or it would either offend or turn on someone around me. Why did my butt look like that in jeans? How could I make myself smaller? How could I take up less space? Now as an overweight person in part due to a chronic illness I think, is my body the reason I am single? It has taken the opposite route. Instead of attracting men when I shouldn’t it is so ugly that no one will ever want me. But should someone want me for my body?_  
_Brooke, diary entry day four_

As Moreland (2019) argues, bodies cannot be ignored when rhetorical events are analyzed as the body as space has “material dimensions that affect what we do there” (p. 417). While critiquing the norms of purity discourse, Brooke expresses how the subjectivity of her body is rhetorical. Not only is Brooke questioning the physical place of purity upon her body (dressing modestly, the size and shape of her body, clothing she can or cannot wear on her body, disabilities), but her diary entry allows us to see how she is pushing back against purity’s disembodiment (taking up less space, making herself smaller) and historical-cultural disembodiment of purity (how her body impacts relationships, lack of relationships, fearing wrong types of relating). The rhetorical act of pushing back and naming hurt allows ExVangelicals to name the ways by which purity impacts the spaces from which they operate.
The fourth step in critiquing the norms of evangelical purity requires individuals to examine the fluidity of identity. This concept of recognizing that even the ExVangelical identity is not “cookie cutter” as Caleigh puts it was touched on in several interviews. Brom described how his ExVangelical identity allows him to wrestle with the fluidity of sexuality and gender. SG, Elane, and Paige each expressed how their ExVangelical identities allow them to process the fluidity of inter/national identities. Jenny, Thea, and Erica spoke of their ExVangelical identity allowing them to analyze their own whiteness and racial fluidity. In the exploration of ExVangelicalism and its promised fluidity in and of itself, ExVangelicals can begin to explore the fluidity of other identities and identity categories as they grapple with purity’s colonial order. In doing so, ExVangelicals move against the very nature of purity discourse as it endeavors to categorize and code race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

The fifth and final step of critiquing the norms of purity requires individuals to question acts of exclusion which are often disguised as inclusive acts. When explaining the purpose of her ExVangelical identity, Anna described the ability and freedom to question aspects painted as inclusive within evangelical purity. She stated that being an ExVangelical means “moving away from the drive of excluding people” and labeling others and practices based on “belonging or not.” Part of critiquing the norms of purity from the ExVangelical label means redefining “acceptance” out of “your love for people and your love for them where they are, not because they fit a certain parameter.” Questioning acts of exclusion and inclusion allows ExVangelicals to examine sites of inclusion as purity, rhetorically weaponizing inclusive practices as ultimately acts of exclusion.

As Shotwell (2016) positions the critique of norms, we understand this act as participating in active questioning of specific components often held as normalized and
unworthy of critique. ExVangelicals display a thorough critique of norms as they attempt to question various layers involved with evangelical purity. By examining concepts of comfort, recognizing expectations, pushing back to name experiences with hurt, exploring the fluidity of identity, and questioning the acts of exclusion and inclusion ExVangelicals represent a movement of post-religious individuals shaking the tenets of purity by un-normalizing its rhetorical functioning in various spaces. While critiquing the norms of purity discourse plays a vital role in their post-purity movement, ExVangelicals represent a theoretical movement towards a rhetoric of impurities.

### 5.7 A Rhetoric of Impurities: Excavation and Encountering Turning Points

*Until recently, I’ve believed that I have mostly distanced myself from the religion I was raised in. I am very proud of the work I have done to actively deconstruct and intentionally depart myself from Evangelicalism, but recently it has been more in my face, I guess you could say, that I still have a lot of work to do.*

*Thea, diary entry day one*

In previous chapters (including this one), I argue that ExVangelicals represent impurity through their identity, label, and nuanced behavior in their post-purity stances. However, for us to gain knowledge worth applying to our various experiences with purity discourse, I explore how ExVangelicals provide us a theoretical lens into what I term a rhetoric of impurities. A rhetoric of impurities is discovered when we trace purity’s rhetorical functioning in the places and spaces we inhabit. Therefore, ExVangelicals, with their post-purity movement and identity, represent this theoretical stance of a rhetoric of impurities through their critical re-engagement with sites of purity. As Thea’s entry above shows, their movement towards a rhetoric of impurities requires two rhetorical functions: excavation of and encountering purity. From Thea’s narrative, they frame excavating purity as “actively deconstruct[ing]” and encountering purity as “intentionally depart[ing]” purity.
As laid out in Chapter Two, we understand that in the ExVangelical role of unweaving oneself from evangelical purity discourse, ExVangelicals partake in impure and “indecent theologies” (Barreto & Sirvent, 2019). In doing so, they purposefully excavate purity to encounter impurity. As Enns and Myers (2021) argue, excavating acts as an intentional uncovering of information kept hidden, and encountering is locating ways to engage with what has been excavated. Both these components of a movement towards a rhetoric of impurities tie together theoretical, methodological, and epistemological concepts used in this dissertation thus far. From rhetorics of identification, place, and space to a critical queer feminist lens and mixed methods centered on tracing narratives of trauma and harm, both excavating and encountering purity allow us to mess with what is assumed of purity and work towards living ethically impure lives (Shotwell, 2016).

Life is so much easier
now that I don’t have to hide
or/change/or/edit/my views.
I can truly be myself
and not worry for a second
what anyone thinks.
Leaving the judgmental
space of Evangelicalism
is more freeing than I ever dreamed.
I am thankful/every/day
for my decision to walk away.
I haven’t/looked
over my shoulder/once.

-Erica, diary entry day five

The above poem, written by Erica, displays the relationship between excavating to encounter purity as these two functions are shaped as turning points in the ExVangelical movement. After reading through Erica’s poetic reflection, I decided to title this piece, “Excavating to Encounter” as her words walk us through the turning point in excavating and encountering’s rhetorical
relationship. In “Excavating to Encounter,” Erica allows us to see how excavation works as a recognition. At the beginning of her reflection, Erica writes of recognizing the weighty experiences of hiding, changing, and editing herself in an effort to fit purity boundaries. She frames evangelical purity as a “space” in which she must “leave” and “walk away” from. This act of excavating purity as something to recognize and leave allows her to encounter something new about purity: the liberation of its opposite. By encountering impurity, she moves towards a rhetoric of impurities in which she can openly “dream,” or desire something different. This state of impurity allows Erica to move forward and not feel the pull to regretfully “[look] over my shoulder.”

5.7.1 Excavation of Purity

The diaries kept by participants were filled with excerpts reflecting ExVangelical’s rhetorical excavation of purity discourse. Beyond just its purpose in uncovering hidden realities of purity, participants’ excavation of purity creates disorder from the order purity has enthused.

As I removed myself from the radicalized evangelical sections of American Christianity, it led me to question other aspects that I was taught, ultimately leaving the church entirely.

-SG, diary entry day one

While SG phrases her excavation as questioning and leaving purity, her process of excavation allows her to see what was purposeful to her previous role in evangelical purity. She writes of locating community, yet now, she reflects on the need to question aspects of said community.

When I think about purity culture and the deep shame it created within me, it’s hard to fathom how deep and wide its effects are. I blamed my badness, failure, and disgusting sinful nature on losing my virginity when it was actually a coercive, disrespectful, and scary situation that therapists have later told me was assault.

-Paige, diary entry day three

Throughout Paige’s diary, she reflects on how purity taught her a particular order and way of relating to her thoughts, experiences, and self. Following Mathieu’s (2014) construction of
excavation, Paige’s entry represents how one must be mindful of the intricacies of mundane language and choice. Aliza’s diary also paints a picture of this slow and steady mindfulness.

*I don’t often pause to think about the impact purity culture had on me, but when I do, it starts to peel back layers to wounds I forget are even there. It’s sometimes hard to know something wounded you when it’s indoctrinated into your psyche from infancy.*

-Aliza, diary entry day two

*Pausing to reflect today on purity and its impact on me. It’s sometimes hard to recognize how it still influences my daily life, because it has been so deeply engrained that I don’t always recognize its presence.*

-Aliza, diary entry day three

Excavating purity becomes a slow and mindful process in which the rhetorical layers, as Aliza writes, are peeled back, enacting Mathieu’s concept of secular mindfulness.

While excavating purity discourse seems clear regarding ExVangelicals attempting to weed its discursive layers out completely, diaries reflected what Lucas (2001) warns us to consider. When excavating concepts often held as untestable, we often contemplate what must be conserved. The entries below display participants, in their attempts to excavate purity teachings, wrestling earnestly with what to conserve of what they have been taught regarding relationship, identity, and sexuality.

*We were virgins on our wedding night, although we’d skirted around the technical definition. We had a lot of shame about “taking things too far” while dating, and I couldn’t just turn it off. So I had a very confusing experience going from “good evangelical girl” to “sexy wife.” I struggled with the diametrically opposed identities. Things are so much better now, especially because I have a loving and patient husband, but I still struggle with the effects of purity culture on our sex life. At forty years old and almost two decades of marriage.*

-Jenny, diary entry day six

*On this journey of figuring out my sexuality, I have wondered if it’s truly that I am bisexual, or if I was severely neglected in terms of affection. The hyper-religiosity in my life caused me to shut out all human contact, and I definitely wasn’t receiving it at home. Could the idea of purity impact healthy affection between even friends and give my brain*
the signal of sexual turn on when, in reality, it could simply be a deprivation of affection and my body confuses the signals? I’m not really sure. It’s hard to know if my attractions have always been present, because I was so guarded and stuffed my sexuality so deep that even as I reflect on it, I don’t really have answers. How does one even begin to understand their sexuality after heavy abuse at home that leveraged and amplified purity culture to me as a girl?

-Aliza, diary entry day one

Add to this the fact that “sex outside of marriage” (yet another common phrase) was so demonized and pathologized that I felt incredible fear at the thought of entering into a permanent state with someone else who would be considered bad or sinful. Just remembering this makes me remember the constant state of fear and dread that I lived in, always afraid to make any move because it could irreparably diminish my life and soul forever.

-Becky, diary entry day one

While excavating purity requires Jenny to wrestle with how she struggles with her role as a wife, her entry shows how she contemplates the purpose of her marriage. Through her dualistic excavotory work, Jenny can ponder the nuance of her post-purity marriage. Aliza’s entry displays earnest struggle with the relationship between several factors: abuse, sexuality, and purity culture. The questions Aliza asks provide a glimpse of her treading between these factors and their relationship with one another while still centering the self-doubt she experiences. Through the questions she asks, we see how her questions allow her to contemplate both what of purity needs to be extracted, yet what has impacted her that may or may not have a relationship with purity culture. Becky’s entry shows how her excavation of purity centers on the experience of fear and dread associated with physical relationships due to purity teachings. All three of these examples of rhetorical excavation represent how a rhetoric of impurities allows individuals to name and ask a variety of questions regarding purity and its deeper, more lasting impact. As Enns, Myers (2021), Lucas (2001), and Mathieu (2014) posit, the act of excavating is an act of questioning that does not follow a distinctive timeline. Therefore, excavation through the
theoretical positioning of a rhetoric of impurities does not follow a religious deconstruction script. Instead, excavating provides a rhetorical space in which purity becomes slowly visible, accountable, and understood through various lenses, languages, and perspectives.

5.7.2 Excavation as Turning Points

After asking difficult questions, Brom paints a picture of his experience with evangelical purity forcing him into an outsider’s perspective in the final line of his entry below.

\[
\text{I'm tired of all of this ugliness. I never cared what other people did with their bodies. Why does God care so much? He made us this way, right? Any malfunctions are manufacturers error. Why were we screamed at for breaking rules, when our acts affected no one else? Why wasn't my home ever safe? Why was I always on the outside looking in on my own family?}
\]

-Brom, diary entry day three

From his stance, we understand Brom’s excavation as balancing both the spatial impact of purity on his relationships, family, community, and its impact on him and his role within purity. From the data, the process of excavation entails ExVangelicals pondering purity’s impact on both wider spaces and within the space of oneself. Because of this, participants spoke of excavation happening within two types of meta-themed turning points: Excavation of community and excavation of self.

The Turning Point of Excavating Community and Church

Participants spoke of turning points existing in which they began to carve out space for excavating purity. Some participants described how excavation stemmed from looking at the bigger picture of evangelical purity. Emma, SG, and Evan explained how they began questioning the context in which purity was taught. SG talked about examining purity teaching outside of the “hypersexualized” space it is often taught in conjunction with scripture. Emma explained how
she found space to excavate by educating herself on historical commentaries regarding biblical passages used in purity teachings. She claimed,

The more [purity] gets talked about as a historically situated thing…I think the easier it is for people to understand that it’s arbitrary and that it’s all about just case by case, person by person, choice by choice.

Evan described forming reading groups centered on acts of excavating in which individuals’ ideas of excavating look and sound different. He claimed conversations within these groups served as turning points because there “was just a questioning opening up. You can question these things.” These spaces were different than evangelical spaces because “you can’t actually question certain things in the evangelical world. They’d be like, ‘Oh yeah, ask your questions and stuff, but there’s some things you just don’t ask about.’” Olivia and Jess named non-church groups to help them excavate as well. Jess described having friends excavating helps her “have conversations about ‘do we actually identify with what we’re teaching?’” Olivia argued that stepping away from evangelical authors and speakers has provided her space to think about her religiosity with questioning having space. She explained, “I love to be cerebral, so it’s just a self-exercise to be like, ‘Okay, I guess I’ll just try to live in a relationship and not in a class structure about my faith.’”

*The deconstruction movement is really just one of uncovering the truth and holding those who did harm accountable through our shared stories which function to empower and heal each other.*

-Becky, diary entry day two

Paige explained that starting small but excavating more specific concepts of evangelical purity allowed her to begin excavating larger topics. She described starting with the purity culture teachings of her youth regarding premarital sex. From here, she claimed she began to wrestle with the “structure of the church” and has now been excavating the thread of
“colonialism” throughout American evangelicalism. Aliza, too, described how her excavating personal experiences with purity led her to examine “this theme between abuse and the church.” Even from within the physical place of the church, participants spoke of excavating the spatial rhetorics of purity. SG described a turning point in which bringing her partner to a church service suddenly made them self-aware of purity rhetorics. She explained,

So throughout the entire sermon, I was sitting there thinking about the conversation I was going to have to have with [my partner] afterward and how I was going to have to explain what that means to Christians, and it means to me and how those are different. And then I think that was…where I just realized that I don’t believe that things that are said here are true anymore.

Brom too described sitting in a church sermon and starting to wonder if the ExVangelical movement would be something to look into. After listening to a sermon he described as “deeply sexist and homophobic and fear-mongering and political,” he stated, “it’s probably what spurred me to look for anything about [ExVangelicalism]. Cause I’m like, there has to be somebody here that speaks up.” Alison stated that the physical place of the church and the sermons she heard encouraged her to see purity discourse as a bubble in need of being disrupted. Her state of questioning (excavating) allowed her to seek people who would be “authentic” and “relatable.”

Now I’m fortunate enough to have friends who are on a similar journey out of evangelicalism and into greater authenticity. During COVID, I also downloaded Tik Tok and made a few videos related to my deconstruction. I ended up finding a good bit of community there among deconstructing/ExVangelical/anti-purity-culture content creators. It was an unexpected source of support that I appreciate to this day. It’s nice to know that I’m not crazy and I’m not alone in my experiences.

-Jenny, diary entry day four
The Turning Point of Excavating Self

Beyond excavating purity from larger spaces such as communities and churches, ExVangelicals experienced a turning point in their excavations in which their own body as space was considered in relation to purity.

The woman I was ten, maybe even five years ago, would have not felt comfortable verbalizing that thought with others. I am so thankful to be free of the restrictions I felt before, when I was in the evangelical space and taught to condemn such folks.

-Erica, diary entry day three

Like Erica’s entry above shows, the usage of oneself is poignant in the excavation of purity, especially since purity discourse weaponizes bodies and codifies identities. During our interview, Evan argued that the process of excavating self should be celebrated as a normal experience, yet within evangelical purity, excavation becomes a feared process. He compared excavation of self to raising a child “with a certain set of rules and things being defined” but “eventually, that child is going to be questioning things and discover stuff for themselves.” As Evan argued, the turning points of excavating self often rely on experiences of personal and emotional confusion instead of a natural progression of maturity and thinking for oneself. Thea described dealing with mental health issues while attending college. When attempting to receive help and support from her evangelical family, friends, and childhood church, Thea explained they were placed within an impossible dichotomy between “loving Jesus” and “struggling with mental illness.” When asked what they meant by this, Thea answered that purity taught them that “if you love Jesus, you would not be anxious because you would give all your fears and worries to him…it was very much one or the other.” Thea stated their mom “questioned my Christian walk…and personal relationship with Jesus because I was struggling with depression and anxiety so much.”

Modesty is a key part of my purity culture experience. In high school I felt like such an outcast for not having a bikini or sports bras, or work out clothes like my friends had. My
coach told me that my swim suit for practice was 3 sizes too big. She ordered me a new one. Her family took me shopping and I bought spandex (!!!) shorts and a sports bra for our workouts. This “awakening” is so funny to me now because at the end of the day, I felt so uncomfortable wearing those clothes but I did them to fit in. Now I wish there was a middle ground for me. Something in between what my mom wanted and what I wanted.

-Brooke, diary entry day two

This dichotomy between personal purity and the tension of navigating young adulthood was a theme throughout many participants’ descriptions of excavating themselves from purity. Alison told me about visiting Israel when she was in college and attempting to grasp purity through the emotional experience of visiting the garden of Gethsemane. However, she describes her memory of “just sit[ting] there and [being] like, ‘I don’t know what to read in my bible. I don’t know what to write in my journal. Why am I even here right now?’” From her visit, she began to question how emotions are manipulated through evangelical purity discourse and if one does not express appropriate emotion, they are left to feel impure.

Caleigh, Kiera, and Thea discussed how their sexualities were placed on a dichotomy, thus encouraging them to wrestle with excavating purity. Caleigh stated that being in a position in which she had to “figure out this piece of my identity” in such a way to “lead me somewhere” deemed pure led her to a space in which she became “deep into questioning lots of things about evangelical Christianity.” Kiera described a situation she had been in where she and her romantic partner were exploring their physical relationship. He had asked Kiera about her “physical boundaries.” She stated she had to pause and ask herself,

Am I anxious because this person is dangerous [and] asking me [about boundaries] as an unsafe, bad person? Or am I anxious because of a system, a belief system that is so ingrained in my body mainly of believing in hell or horrible consequences that I’m afraid of those things?
Kiera explained how this moment with her sexuality and the question posed by herself regarding her anxiety about expressing her sexuality helped her when she started to excavate. The questions above helped lead to deeper questions regarding evangelical purity discourse. She claimed, “My anxiety is from consequences, whether it’s hell or being kicked out of community or being a sinner, not [from] being a true Christian or whatever it may be.” Thea described another internal turning point in her excavation as being around the time she was a teenager and was figuring out that she was queer. She stated “There was no way that could be both [pure and queer]. And so, I knew absolutely that I was gay, but I did not know absolutely that I believed in this ideology.” From this turning point, Thea explained they began to “think more critically about other information I was receiving from the church.”

While participants recalled and described specific moments in which their excavation with self and community took a turn, allowing them space to question and uncover purity discourse, several participants used their diaries to messily trace these moments. In the entry below, Evan wrote of several disconnected moments.

_I know of a girl that had a kid when she was in high school and was not married. I was catching up with her a few years later and she mentioned that her church had her get up in front of the congregation and apologize for getting pregnant. That made me so angry...here is a young, single, probably scared girl about to have a baby and the church community needs her to apologize to them...I don’t think I have a point with these stories other than they have stuck with me and been a moment of realization where I knew what I didn’t want to be like._

_Evan, diary entry day four_

From both interviews and diaries, we understand the role of excavation not only providing space for questioning purity, but also paving space for encountering impurity in the movement towards a rhetoric of impurities. Unlike structure questions designed to encourage a homogenous concept of religious deconstruction, excavation does not require direction. However, rhetorical
excavation of purity discourse will also allow individuals to name the ways by which purity exists and constructs itself within social settings.

5.7.3 Encountering Impurity

As Wilson, Darling (2016), Faier, and Rofel (2014) position its role, encountering rhetorical functions in a space of difference. In this space of difference, new ideas, concepts, and identities can take shape and develop into new categories. In the growing of categorical understandings, purity becomes deconstructed, and individuals can then engage with their excavation of purity by encountering impurities, or new ways of relating to purity. From a rhetorical perspective, encountering requires acknowledgment of differences and when differences are negotiated. This was done heavily by participants in their diaries. A majority of diarists traced their family’s religious history (Jenny, Thea, Paige, SG, Caleigh, Brom, Elane, Anna, and Evan) and several openly reflected on their post-purity guilt by comparing how they used to partake in purity and how they know encounter impurity (Elane, Erica, Evan, and Thea).

*I am proud to be more open-minded, but also it makes me sad to think about the judgment I held against others for so long. I am working on forgiving myself for that.*

*Erica, diary entry day two*

While encountering presents itself as a hopeful rhetorical space in which differences can be helpful, participants reflected on how encountering impurity does not come without an acknowledgment of the wreckage of purity and what it promised ExVangicals would be protected from.

*I’m still grieving that part of my identity, those relationships, and my hopes and dreams that were tied to that place. And yet, I’ve also never felt more free or more at peace spiritually.*

*Jenny, diary entry day five*

*One of the most difficult things in my deconstruction journey is learning to trust myself... When I first realized that purity culture was messed up—my first step before questioning...*
the church at large—I didn’t have the tools to even know I could just trust myself with my comfort level about sex. I felt like I had to follow another ideology. Replace purity culture. So the other thing I knew of that I tried to replace it with was “sexually empowered, independent woman, feminist, sex positive,” etc. which isn’t wrong—but basically I felt like I had to be The Most Empowered Sex Positive person and have casual sex and be okay with it...I felt like I needed an authority to direct me.

-Paige, diary entry day seven

Encountering impurity still reflects the natural fear of letting go of purity. Even during our member check, Elane asked me to rephrase what I meant by encountering impurity as she seemed uncomfortable with the label. After our member check, I read through Becky’s diary. One of her entries helped me understand Elane’s fear regarding the encountering of impurity.

Sex was bad and dirty and only reserved for some mystical magical moment when you would be married. Anything outside of that was painted to be something to fear and reject. This ultimately led me to dear and reject myself. This is because our sexuality is deeply embedded in who we are - it is an integral part of our personhood, and it was something we were made to feel deeply ashamed of. And so we reject, demonize, and shame that part of ourselves. It does not go away very quickly and it is really hard work to repair that.

-Becky, diary entry day one

From Becky’s perspective, encountering impurity is stretching, even as it follows excavating purity. As Becky states, the rules of purity are “an integral part of our personhood.” Therefore, purity “does not go away very quickly.”

However, amongst the grit and grime of encountering impurity, participants’ stories of encountering impurity represent a movement in which participants’ questions regarding purity are centered and their experiences of disembodiment are brought forth. Therefore, encountering impurity becomes a rhetorical process of encountering oneself and one’s body through a post-purity lens.
Deconstructing evangelicalism on the whole, and purity culture particularly, has challenged me to the core of my being. But once I allowed myself to question what was once unquestionable, I found a more authentic identity than I’ve ever had.

-Jenny, diary entry day seven

5.7.4 Encountering as Turning Points

Unlike excavating purity, encountering impurity involves one type of turning point: the self. During interviews, participants spoke of encountering impurity as questioning their physical self and personal affect in relation to purity. Thea described encountering impurity as allowing them to “not see myself as dirty and raw.” Jenny defined encountering impurity as openly placing herself in “shifting conversations” regarding evangelical purity and not turning away from nuanced answers. Jess claimed that to encounter impurity, one must acknowledge and take on “the awareness of the effects of evangelicalism and how they can carry over for years later.” Encountering impurity requires individuals to recognize the “instilled patterns and behaviors that are harder to unlearn.”

Participants also framed encountering impurity as a space from which ExVangelicals must operate. Aliza claimed encountering impurity “felt like stepping out of this little box of all that I had ever known.” From the little box, Aliza described “stepping out into large expanse” and recognizing that “there’s a lot outside of this tiny little God box I’ve been in for 30 years.” Brom explained how encountering impurity was understood by him when he kept trying to interact with purity and “reentering that space,” however he felt uncomfortable which “spurred [him] to seek out a different kind of thing.” The experience of entering or reentering spaces by encountering impurity prompts individuals to think about their body as space operating within larger spaces. In doing so, encountering impurity means encountering rhetorical spaces differently while simultaneously encountering self differently.
Today I attended my first-ever Memphis Pride Parade. It was overwhelming to be there as an Ally and see so many people celebrating something that I would have once avoided, due to my evangelical stances...I was so happy to see them owning who they are and proudly displaying their bodies. I fully embraced their joyful appearances, not once questioning whether it fit into a purity mold I once held so close. How freeing it was to no longer have that sense of judgment toward others. It was one of the most uninhibited I have ever felt; and I truly believe it has changed the direction of my life.

- Erica, diary entry day one

This simultaneous encountering of self and space positions ExVangelicals to continue wrestling with purity discourse instead of remaining stagnant in their excavation stage. This theme showed itself in diaries as participants wrestled with impurities and layers to their identities.

Having shame and lack of education as my foundation as to how I’m supposed to raise my own daughter, I feel at a loss of how to find a middle ground, and also wondering all the areas I’m still naïve due to my own sexual education depravity. My tendency is to swing in the total opposite direction of total freedom, expression, exploration, but I know that often swinging to the polar opposite side has it’s own negative side affects. I want her to feel beautiful and believe she’s beautiful outside of what her body may look like in comparison to the generations trends of beauty. I want her to learn about her own pleasure, but how involved should I be in helping her discover that?

- Elane, diary entry day three titled, “Purity Culture and Motherhood”

One thing I’ve been thinking about lately is the emergence of terms like exvangelical, deconstruction, and purity culture and how they give not only a name for something many of us organically enter into and go through but also they function as a beacon for others that signals the necessary questioning and evaluation all individuals must undergo in order to truly differentiate and solidify their authentic beliefs. These words are something that curates an invitation to evaluate their relationship to not only what they were indoctrinated with but the process by which they were indoctrinated...These words give us another option that doesn’t devalue us and force us to live with a pathologized label.

- Becky, diary entry day seven

I suppose judgement is just a partner to shame. It seems the psychological implications of feeling such deep shame for simply existing in a female body are probably deeper than I really realize...I can feel the wound so deep in my core, it hurts sometimes to think about its detriment on my life.
Aliza, diary entry day three

I like myself so much more now than I ever did in the days of being a part of the Evangelical church. I had a sort of sadness all the time that I couldn't fully recognize while I was in it...Thank God I no longer carry those feelings. I love myself wholeheartedly and I don't think that could have been possible in that space.

-Erica, diary entry day six

Elane, Becky, Aliza, and Erica tell stories of using layers of their identities to encounter impurity within new spaces. Elane wrote of her role as a mother and her relationship to her daughter. This space of new parenthood asks her to encounter impurity to not fall back in line with purity teachings even though she feels “clueless” and is still “learning” about herself. Becky frames her identity as an ExVangelical—a known deconstructing figure—as an “invitation” to prod and poke purity. Aliza reflects on her gender and body as space in which impurity can be redefined while Erica continues to question how her body can exist in spaces in which she can be both comfortable and offer comfort to others while wrestling with impurities and differences.

Following on the heels of excavating purity, encountering impurity allows individuals to question the role they play in purity discourse and post-purity explorations. Participants spoke of encountering impurity through the space of their body and identity and how they want to reenter spaces that purity would have designated as safe or unsafe. Encountering impurity encourages individuals to embrace the nuances of their social lives and challenge evangelical purity’s panic over order and category. Therefore, encountering impurity messes with the language of purity as a rhetoric of impurities relies on nuance, ambiguity, and speculation. As Solnit (2014) posits, this type of language, in its impurities, requires more work. But as Shotwell reminds us, this is vital to consider in the effort to reexamine the ethics of our social worlds. As Evan writes in his diary, encountering impurity pushes the envelope and allows individuals to wrestle with purity without a need to locate a homogenous and bold answer.
Seeing the certainty or “stubbornness” of evangelicals has made me realize that I tend to hold things the same way, even though I’m no longer a part of that group. It seems like many others who argue about certain topics with evangelicals will act the same way. I really wish there was a better way of showing the grey-area of a subject.

-Evan, diary entry day three

5.8 Purity Deconstruction as a Rhetoric of Impurities

With little research conducted on religious deconstruction (Fekete & Knippel, 2020; Hedges, 2017) and the need to examine the lasting impact of purity discourse (Houser, 2021; Moslener, 2022; Ramler, 2022), a theory for a rhetoric of impurities seems appropriate and fitting. As a theoretical lens, a rhetoric of impurities allows us to understand the rhetorical functioning of deconstruction from a critical rhetoric lens, examining the transactional roles of excavating and encountering. While ExVangelicals must excavate (uncover and question) purity to encounter (relearn and reconstruct) impurity, their stories of purity-enforced trauma allow us to see what religious deconstruction (like the ExVangelical movement) may teach us about dismantling purity throughout contexts. During our interviews, participants framed religious deconstruction as the act of excavating to encounter; however, their language is helpful in thinking about purity deconstruction in general.

According to Olivia, deconstruction is often painted by experiences with “anger, resentment, bitterness, and sometimes peace.” The act of deconstruction, amongst these experiences, is a “coming to terms with what [one] believes and what [one] does not believe.” She described deconstruction as a “continuing to wrestle and question.” Jenny defined deconstructing as “questioning” in order to “explore” so that one can ask themselves, “Is this who I want to be? Are these the beliefs that I truly do hold still? Is the value system that I want to continue to be a part of?”
It wasn’t until the COVID-19 pandemic and watching endless TikTok videos that I realized just how many other people had so many of the same questions...and that the concept of deconstruction existed. Which is where my journey towards being an exvangelical truly started seeing daylight.

-Caleigh, diary entry day five

The concept of questioning to explore represents the rhetorical relationship between excavating and encountering as one must question (excavate) to explore (encounter) purity and impurities.

Deconstruction is not merely a deconstruction of religious thought, but deconstructing purity requires individuals to move towards a rhetoric of impurities as they mess with prior beliefs they held regarding their body as space. Becky described deconstructing as “walking away from [purity]” and as a “journey of figuring out who I really am, not who I think I’m supposed to be, not who I’m told to be, not who I’m trying to be, to make someone else happy.” Aliza claimed that taking a rhetoric of impurities through her deconstruction allowed her, “for the first time,” to feel “like I was in my body. I was not trying to get away from the pain. I was in and my body.” She explained that a rhetoric of impurities allowed her to “let go of the old stuff, the old beliefs, the old pain.” Kiera described how working towards a rhetoric of impurities allows her to “release the concept of hell from my mind because that was what was scaring me the most.”

From this chapter, we understand how the ExVangelical movement serves as a case of post-purity deconstruction and an example of a movement moving towards a rhetoric of impurities. ExVangelicalism tells us five key components involved with purity discourse. First, purity is continuously constructed by American evangelicalism as it serves as a political and colonial classification. Second, purity discourse aims to control impurity by obsessing over sin and sex. Third, evangelicalism will always frame itself as pure, while ExVangelicalism counter responds as an impure state. Fourth, ExVangelicalism’s response to purity discourse is to critique what of purity is normalized and unquestioned. Finally, a rhetoric of impurities requires both
excavating and encountering and ExVangelical narratives allow us to understand this theoretical movement through their own post-purity narratives. These narratives—as rhetorical diaries and qualitative interviews—provide us both public and private insight into a post-purity movement.

Through the examination of place, space, and identification, I argue that ExVangelicals’ purity deconstruction process can be understood through a rhetoric of impurities. By understanding how ExVangelicals excavate purity to encounter the promises of impurities, we can visualize the rhetorical promise of post-purity belonging and queer our ideas of post-religiosity functioning only within strict categories of religion and religious identity (Edwards, 2021). While ExVangelicalism tells a story focusing heavily on evangelical purity culture, in the following chapter I implore us to wrestle with what ExVangelicals tell us about social purity and the hope for a rhetoric of impurities—even if this argument requires us to read the last line.

Tears were just streaming down [my friend’s] face, but she held a fairly neutral expression. We just sat there looking at [her purity ring] while she nearly silently cried until she finally spoke. She said, “I fucking hate this thing.”

I took my multitool out of my bag, opened it up to show the wire cutters, and asked her if she wanted to get rid of it. She took the tool and, hesitantly at first, started snipping the ring into pieces. She ended up cutting [it] up into little shards and dumping them into the trash.

Good riddance.

-Brom, diary entry day two
CHAPTER 6

Applying a Rhetoric of Impurities: Future Directions for Excavating and Encountering Purity

“To be against purity is not to be for pollution, harm, sickness, or premature death. It is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous.”

- Alexis Shotwell, Against Purity

The study of ExVangelicalism and purity discourse are both vital in their own field of inquiry. However, my study locates a relationship between the two that addresses an opportunity for future scholarship to embrace the rhetoric of impurities. The ExVangelical movement houses individuals who are actively attempting to excavate (uncover) purity and encounter (relearn) impurity through their counter-religious pursuits of belonging. If scholars are to offer tools by which we can diagnose purity and readjust our orientation to living against purity (in theory, ideology, and practice), ExVangelicals provide an intimate insight into the messy, varied, and laborious act of doing so. From the case of ExVangelicalism, we learn how to embrace the discomfort of impurity to acknowledge and criticize the discursive functioning of purity. As I have set out to do from the beginning, I explored the rhetorical use of place, space, and identification from within the ExVangelical movement. In doing so, I aimed to understand the rhetorical purpose of this identity and post-religious movement as a response to purity. Through their excavation and encountering of purity discourse, ExVangelicals construct new ways of responding to the deeper ethical and political layers of purity.

In this final chapter, I remind us of the purpose of examining purity rhetorics beyond its cultural framing within the late 20th and early 21st-century purity culture movement. By queering purity, we understand how it functions as both a public and intimately conspired discourse. From the ExVangelical movement, we see how a post-purity perspective counteracts purity discourse.
through the use of rhetorics of place, space, and identification. With a focus on post-purity narratives deconstructing purity discourse, we see how purity rhetorics codify xenophobic sexuality and whiteness. Through purity’s involvement with evangelicalism, its situating of the body as place, and issuing paranoia with post-religious spaces, purity should be understood as a panic rhetoric (Barnard, 2020). In response to this, a rhetoric of impurities offers a merging act of queering place, space, and identification in order to move against purity’s pursuit of sameness. I argue that a rhetoric of impurities is helpful beyond place and spaces of ExVangelicalism and evangelicalism. From my scholarly positionality and perspective, I frame a rhetoric of impurities having applied need within issues of healthism, heteronormativity, white feminism, and the college classroom.

6.1 Review of Research Questions

In my introduction, I posed three research questions. Not only did these questions guide my theoretical and methodological inquiry, but they helped frame each chapter as separate, yet intertwined case studies. The first question I offered was aimed to help me engage with the literature on ExVangelicalism, post-evangelicalism, and post-religiosity as a whole. By asking how a label such as “ExVangelical” is used as a rhetorical tool to navigate post-purity experiences and purity consciousness, my focus centered on ExVangelicals. In doing so, ExVangelical place, space, and identification became the text with which I critically engaged. This question was largely placed in conversation throughout Chapters Four and Five as my focus remained on the rhetorical purpose of such a post-religious label being used in the deconstruction of purity discourse.

The second research question posed centered on the roles of place, space, and identification within the framing of the ExVangelical identity as it remains a liminal and
arguably impure identity. This question allowed me to explore multiple ExVangelical narratives and to mess with the boundaries that purity places on identity. This was done extensively in Chapters Four and Five as I queered three types of ExVangelical texts: interview data, published memoirs, and participant diaries.

The third and final question I constructed was designed to transition my inquiry into a theoretical, and hopefully applied, direction. By asking how ExVangelicals navigate the excavation and encountering of purity, I aimed to understand what a rhetoric of impurities would entail. This question formed the direction for Chapter Five and helped situate this final chapter as well.

Examining the developing and contextual ExVangelical movement is important as it produces new categories of religious identity, social justice, and the intricate relationship between the two. From the literature surrounding ExVangelicalism, we understand that ExVangelicals reposition testimony to share their liberation from evangelical purity discourse—as it remains a deeply personal and often traumatic process. From our research examining components of the ExVangelical movement, we open ourselves up to new ideas of religiosity, transitional religiosity, religiosity tied to culture, religio-cultural contexts, and religious agency (Edwards, 2021). Additionally, investigating purity discourse is vital as purity rhetorics are farmed from our ethical and political situatedness (Shotwell, 2016). To critically engage with and take issue with purity rhetorics, scholars provide tools for us to move against bounding the world as homogenous thereby limiting humanity through separation. Critiquing purity rhetorics requires scholars to offer opportunities to rhetorically reengage with the possibilities of impurities that welcome ambiguity and multiplicity. Doing so allows scholars to confront “colonial ghosts” that continue to use purity as a mechanism for colonialism (Shotwell, 2016, p. 222).
23) and resituate contradictions, rather than simplistic unity (Butler, 1990a), as purposeful to understanding the complexities with identity.

As argued at the beginning of this chapter, I complete this inquiry by providing an applied perspective of how a rhetoric of impurities is vital to fields outside of evangelical purity culture. Houser (2021) argues that while “it is tempting to brush the issues of purity culture aside as a problem created by evangelicals,” purity should not be left behind (p. 221). Instead of leaving topics of purity rhetorics at the foot of research examining evangelical or religiously conservative spaces, we must explore purity’s impact in multiple spheres. Additionally, as the participants expressed in the data analyzed for Chapter Five, discussing purity through a rhetoric of impurities allows us to engage with the complexity of impurities. Exploring purity outside of evangelical spaces allows us to mess with the binary of purity/impurity that is rooted in colonial categories of identities and living (Butler, 1990a; Shotwell, 2016).

6.2 A Rhetoric of Impurities Beyond American Evangelicalism

While this inquiry focused on ExVangelicalism as the case in which purity is deconstructed to understand a rhetoric of impurities, the space of ExVangelicalism allowed us to run parallel with evangelicalism. Meaning, each chapter worked from a foundational understanding of evangelicalism and its usage of purity to weaponize women’s bodies in pursuit of white centricity and xenophobic sexuality. However, analyzing ExVangelical texts allowed us to move away from sheer evangelical space. In doing so, we understand how involved purity rhetorics are as their impact is felt from within the space of ExVangelicalism.

6.2.1 Chapter One and Literature

At the beginning of this dissertation within Chapter One, I argue alongside other scholars that to examine American evangelicalism, one must examine American fundamentalism,
politicism, race, and gender (Balmer, 2021; Bjork-James, 2021; Du Mez, 2020; Herrmann, 2021; Sutton, 2014; Worthen, 2014). The cultural thread of evangelicalism and its use of place and space to formulate a national identity exists beyond the borders of evangelical place. As the literature laid out in Chapter One argues, evangelicalism uses rhetorics of place and space to respond to historical cultural shifts. Through spatial rhetorics of the spiritual, body, family, c/Church, and nation, evangelicalism reinstates borders between what is deemed pure and impure. In doing so, evangelicalism presents pure ways of being and relating within these spaces thus resulting in both material and symbolic exclusions of impurities (Cisneros, 2011). Not only is evangelicalism presenting a case for purity in response to the wider cultural landscape, but because of its missional and patriotic purpose, evangelicalism sees purity as a concept needed outside of evangelical places as well (Balmer, 2021; Bendroth, 1993; Carpenter, 1997; Marsden, 2006; Sutton, 2014; Williams, 2010; Worthen, 2014). As Chapter One sets up the purpose of exploring ExVangelicalism’s counter-response to evangelicalism, I argue that to counteract evangelicalism is to counteract the rhetorics of purity as they exist ideologically and discursively beyond evangelical culture.

6.2.2 Chapter Two and Methods

Beyond the framing of studying purity from the ExVangelical perspective, I argue that examining purity needs to be dynamic. By dynamic, I follow Moslener's (2022), Moultrie's (2017), and Natarajan et al.’s (2022) work and explore post-purity perspectives beyond manufactured stories centering white cis heteronormativity. In Chapter Two I present my purpose in implementing a queer feminist critical qualitative inquiry that examines both religious rhetoric and the multiple layers involved in purity and identity communication. Throughout this chapter, I remind us to explore purity within its multiple formats and post-purity methods of
storytelling. By doing so, I name the ways by which whiteness is both continuously centered and has an opportunity to be recognized and named in post-purity as ExVangelicals wrestle with purity rhetorics. Through a mixed methods approach, I examine purity discourse both within and outside of evangelicalism’s place and space to understand how purity discourse itself uses rhetorics of place and space to constitute identity.

6.2.3 Chapter Three and ExVangelical Identity

In my first case study, I explore the rhetorical identity formation of ExVangelicals. In doing so, Chapter Three provides us a glimpse of understanding purity’s impact on one’s experience with race, gender, and sexuality. Throughout my inquiry, I did not analyze ExVangelicalism as merely a post-evangelical, but as a post-purity identity. By doing so, I critically engage with a post-purity movement that is actively deconstructing purity discourse. By spending time with ExVangelicalism as place, I shift our focus away from evangelicalism as place and see how an identity of impurities provides space for identity formation. In response to how purity constructs boundaries in order to symbolically place a border between pure and impure, ExVangelicals work to offer each other space to re-establish new places of belonging. These new places of belonging work against purity they do not exercise a binary of safety and harm but focus more on belonging.

6.2.4 Chapter Four and Purity Discourse

Stepping away from the rhetorical purpose of the ExVangelical identity, I explore purity discourse. In my examination of narratives critiquing purity discourse, I examine purity beyond its cultural framing within evangelicalism. In Chapter Four, purity’s weaponization of the body as space is laid out. By messing with ExVangelical memoirs and interview data, I analyze the ambiguity involved with post-purity stories to locate purity’s dualistic public and intimate
prowess. Purity often hides behind tales of bodily shame and guilt, but by queering our approach to tales of purity, we see how purity rejects the body as embodied space and places boundaries upon the body. In doing so, the disembodied body becomes place in need of purity.

6.2.5 Chapter Five and a Rhetoric of Impurities

By exploring how purity’s involvement with evangelicalism has an impact beyond the places of white evangelical patriarchy, I present a case for a rhetoric of impurities in Chapter Five. Through the continued perspective of everyday ExVangelicalism, I offer an argument for how a rhetoric of impurities allows post-purity to exist as a purposeful process in the face of purity’s paranoia. Using the ExVangelical experience of excavating purity and encountering impurities, we come to understand how a rhetoric of impurities becomes an embodied practice of rejecting purity and learning how to live ethically impure lives. ExVangelicals display a rhetoric of impurities that rejects conservative political religion, disrupts the control of impurities, disentangles from pure religion, critiques normativity, and sees identity as a process filled with shifts and turning points.

6.3 Applying a Rhetoric of Impurities

While the “ExVangelical” label is rhetorically interesting in its fashion, I argue that studying the rhetorical functioning of this counter-religious label does not remain tied to simple stories of “leaving the Church” or even critiquing American evangelicalism. Rather, asking questions of the rhetorical construction of this identity allows us to envision the deeply embedded and intersectional web of purity rhetorics used to curate order and authority. To ask for the ExVangelical story is to ask for an intimate excavation and encountering of purity for the sake of liberation through the rhetorics of impurities. Because of this, a rhetoric of impurities has political, social, and cultural implications. In the following sections, I offer a definition and
theoretical guidelines for a rhetoric of impurities followed by four spaces in which my position as a scholar needs an embodied practice of a rhetoric of impurities.

6.3.1 A Rhetoric of Impurities: A Definition

In her memoir, *Pure*, Klein (2018) reminds her readers that what purity aims for is sameness. In its pursuit for sameness, purity categories differences and in doing so, removes space for nuance. Shotwell (2016) argues that purity should be known as a colonized classification system. In this system, the binary classifying purity and impurity is constructed relationally and individually. Therefore, purity practices and our pursuit for sameness must be critically observed to “help us understand the symbolic work of social relations that stitch together society” (p. 97). Additionally, Shotwell posits the ideology of purity needs to be addressed as a discourse. Hence, a rhetoric of impurities is advantageous when observing how discourse situates social sameness, therefore issuing a panic regarding otherness and relationships formed by transgressing the borders of purity and impurity.

To engage with a rhetoric of impurities, one must locate instances of purity rhetorics in their everyday and question its motivation and direction. Since purity masquerades itself as a normative function of individual behavior, a rhetoric of impurities meshes with how we rhetorically order our roles and relationships (Douglas, 1966; Shotwell, 2016). Instead of individual pursuits for purity to satisfy an order beyond the self, a rhetoric of impurities embraces pluralism and rhetorizes the body as space. Therefore, a rhetoric of impurities merges rhetorics of place and space and queers our ideas of identification.

*Impure Place and Space*

Through a rhetoric of impurities, place becomes less of a rhetoric of panic. As Chapters Two through Four display, purity discourse weaponizes rhetorics of place to situate itself as
needed for protection and safety. Whether with disapproval of non-evangelical spacemaking or the use of women’s bodies as places in need of purity, purity treats place as certainty and space as unsafe. Through the ExVangelical movement, participants endeavored to disconnect from pure place and sought one another to create new places for their outgroup identity and support for their post-evangelical learning. As the participants described ExVangelicalism as place, we see how a rhetoric of impurities allows one to move beyond ideas of pure place and work to construct a new and needed place. Part of embracing impurity is displacing purity’s focus on certainty. As participants argued, purity’s prerogative is to understand one’s role and positionality with certainty. However, this is limiting, structured, and panic-fueled. Impurities embrace the uncertainty of place. This embracing of uncertainty paves room for us to understand how place exists as what hooks (2009) calls a “diverse ecosystem” (p. 25). From an impure place, we see how “our freedom is inextricably entangled with and constituted through other beings’ freedom,” thus making us pluralistic (Shotwell, 2016, p. 131). A rhetoric of impurities allows us to locate and co-construct new places that can exist alongside one another. Such an impure place moves beyond structures that symbolically place borders between what is pure or impure but blurs these lines.

Unlike purity’s fascination with place and superstition of the body as space, a rhetoric of impurities understands space as a process. As Chapter Three shows us, ExVangelicalism as space provides individuals raised within the structured spaces of evangelicalism room to process their post-purity consciousness. Like SG described in her interview, taking on the post-purity label was not without its tension. She struggled with “grasp[ing]” the label for herself. The tension of acknowledging one’s liminal post-purity identity is part of the process. With its emphasis on space providing one room to process their identity, a rhetoric of impurities allows
individuals to unlearn what they have previously been taught about their body, identity, and relational purpose. Therefore, impure space is un-fixed as seen by how ExVangelicals’ unlearning provides them space to explore an un-fixed religiosity. While purity is space that uses the body to place itself, it centers itself as symbolically transactive and part of what the body needs to rectify borders and protection. In doing so, purity as space disembodies the body and removes it from its spatial identity. This contradicts what Moreland (2019) argues the body rhetorically needs. To explore how the places our bodies occupy ensure communication and how our bodies are communicatively located, we must understand the intersectional and meaningful space of our bodies. Doing so allows us to account for the whole person and de-objectify the body. Through a rhetoric of impurities, we acknowledge the body as layered and embodied. Impurities allow us to question how purity disembodies the body by constructing it as place needing to perform and exist in certain ways. This requires us to problematize metaphors used to place purity on the body and to examine how purity and impurities are mapped upon the body or through certain bodies in relationship with one another.

**Impure Identification**

Beyond using rhetorics of place and space, a rhetoric of impurities queers our concept of identification. By queering identification, a rhetoric of impurities does not work merely as the opposite of purity rhetorics. Instead, impurities reimagine identity without borders between what one is and what one is not (Cisneros, 2011). As with the ExVangelical identity, their impure identity does not mean they are not evangelical or that they exist as religious nones. But through a rhetoric of impurities, we understand their identity as fluid and religious, culturally conscious, and embodied (Edwards, 2021). Since a rhetoric of impurities requires us to observe the rhetorics
of place and space regarding purity, our positionality, and agency are going to implicate notions of purity as well.

When losing social esteem or familial support because of one’s identification, Anderson (2007) argues that such social losses can be seen as gains to one’s agency. As ExVangelical interviews, diaries, and memoirs posit, much of their agency is constructed through what would seem to be negative features of a post-purity identity. While participants emphasized the pain of this experience, their stories depict an identification process that recognizes how an identity of purity was an identity full of struggle, deceit, and shame. Through a rhetoric of impurities, ExVangelicals can let go of using a formula to trace their post-purity process. Instead, through impure identification, ExVangelicals can operate ambiguously with their identity. They can both explain it as a post-purity strategy, yet it can also remain as is, an identity. Anderson posits this ambiguous nexus between how one’s identity is made and not made is a “narrative center around which [one] constitutes [their] identity” (p. 120). Purity urges individuals to locate their identity and provide a clear testimony outlining their identification process as a universal story depicting a crossing from impurities to purity. This crossing not only signifies a hypothetical crossing from a contaminated site to a clean site but of defending oneself from one’s own vulnerability (Shotwell, 2016). A rhetoric of impurities, on the other hand, provides space for one’s identification process to remain just that, a process in which one’s identity about who they are and how they are their identity can be charted. In doing so, a rhetoric of impurities allows identification to be queer, non-normative, and fluid. Within post-purity, one’s identity can contradict, yet be relationally purposive. One’s impure identification is not bordered or even (re)bordered through conversion practices but can exist as the “deepest and most enduring
features of our unique selves that constitute who we believe ourselves to be” (Williams, 2000, p. 7).

A rhetoric of impurities provides space for one to mess with how purity orders rhetorics of place, space, and identification. By being able to identify through differences and to let go of the sameness that purity upholds (Klein, 2018), impurities allow us to recognize or excavate how identity is constructed within a binary of purity/impurity. From a space of excavation, a rhetoric of impurities encourages us to then encounter or reconceptualize how we want to engage with rhetorics of place, space, and identity. Doing so allows us to renew our relationship with place and partake in “collective self-recovery” (hooks, 2009, p. 40). Through excavating and encountering purity, we uncover how bodies are placed and relearn how to relate to ourselves, our bodies, and each other without panics constituting a need for protection.

Through a rhetoric of impurities, the places we inhabit can become “location(s) of possibility” in which boundaries can be transgressed (hooks, p. 55). Our understanding of space and our bodies, as embodied, allows us to understand how we are “sustained, affected by the world, and in turn affect the world” (Shotwell, p. 107). Our excavation and encountering of purity as we engage with a rhetoric of impurities requires us to ethically understand the ways by which personal purity is unhelpful when taking part in the complexities of our world. As Shotwell reminds us, purity is “inadequate, impossible, and politically dangerous” (p. 107). Through the rhetorical acts of excavating and encountering purity discourse, we take on a rhetoric of impurities. Through a rhetoric of impurities lens, we understand the roles of place, space, and identification in helping formulate identity and belonging that moves beyond ideas of purity/impurity. As ExVangelicals display this rhetoric of impurities in their movement in
response to evangelical purity, we see how they respond to the panics, politicism, and white centricity of purity discourse.

6.3.2 A Rhetoric of Impurities as Lens

As stated previously, purity needs to be examined beyond the walls of evangelicalism. I argue a rhetoric of impurities needs to be explored in spaces in which American evangelicalism’s ties are not always pronounced.¹ To further this argument, I offer ways by which a rhetoric of impurities is needed in four areas that are directly involved with purity discourse and my positionality. In the following section, I explore how a rhetoric of impurities as a lens should be applied to healthism, heteronormativity, white feminism, and the college classroom.

Healthism

Shotwell (2016) reminds us that the concept of being pure will never work. Just by existing in community, “we’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure” (p. 7). Biologically speaking, our bodies will always be in contact with viruses, microbes, illness, and even mystery. Purity trains us to be wary of these types of contact. With purity, we must protect our own vulnerabilities to the extent of chasing righteousness instead of compromise, and surety instead of ambiguity. As purity endeavors to individualize the moral imperative of relationships, purity also individualizes ideas of health by centering one’s own body. This concept is called healthism (Crawford, 1980; Shotwell, 2016). Healthism names purity’s influence on individuals being responsible for their bodies and if a body experiences any type of health condition, it can be “rendered as moral failings” (Shotwell, p. 29). Purity as space attempts to code people and situations as pure or impure. The individual human body is symbolically coded as a place in

¹ It is important to note, that while a text may not directly implicate such, American evangelicalism plays a wide-reaching cultural role in the order of our non-religious experiences, particularly within the United States (Griffith, 2017; Kelly, 2016; Margolis, 2020).
which purity is then needed (Douglas, 1966; Snyder, 2014; Turner, 2003). ExVangelicals understand this concept even outside of discussions of bodily health. As Chapter Four displays, purity uses the body as place to orchestrate the physical need for purity. Purity no longer remains spiritually conceptual, but it presents a case for it being adopted as a physical concept.

Through healthism, individuals seeking care, wanting answers about bodily functions, and reckoning with health-based trauma process this all through purity’s individualized approach to the body. In each of their memoirs, Klein, Finch, and Hammon focus on the physical health of their bodies indicating their need for purity. Participants too described moments of health concerns in which they chose purity practices for protection and to answer the moralistic questions regarding their health. These healthism choices are fueled by two parts to purity discourse: purity politics and purity panics. Shotwell frames purity politics as our response to a triangulated fear of contamination. This includes fear of potential physical contamination, ethical fears of our world, and political situations. Purity panics is a panicked belief that we must take a defensive stance against sharing ourselves with a world that remains diverse and ambiguous (Barnard, 2020; Shotwell, 2016). I argue that when examining the ways by which health and bodies are discussed, we need to take on the rhetorical lens of impurities. When thinking of health, one must excavate how health exists as space (as possibilities) and as place (where it is found or located).

For example, during our interviews, both SG and Elane discussed how self-pleasure was deemed unhealthy for them as women seeking purity. With masturbation being a health-based topic, their arguments for feeling shame relating to their practices of self-pleasure indicate healthism. For Elane and SG, masturbation was not about their personal experience, attitudes, or even physical needs related to self-pleasure. Instead, masturbation existed as their sole body
experiencing a moral failing. How masturbation was kept bottled up (in SG’s experience) or shut down (in Elane’s story), the space of self-pleasure and health was deemed invisible, yet their physical bodies were treated as place in which unhealthy behavior existed. The physical boundaries dictating where self-pleasure is deemed healthy, or indicative of a moral failing are further punctuated by DeRogatis’ (2015) work and Elane and SG’s interviews. Elane and SG told me certain acts of self-pleasure are deemed necessary (self-pleasure for the sake of helping their husbands or male partners find release), whereas other acts of self-pleasure performed for their own needs are deemed unhealthy. The healthism involved in this example represents how purity panics and politics are weaved together to produce purity’s usage of the woman’s body as place in need of suppression. Through a rhetoric of impurities, both SG and Elane begin to question this and see how their body is treated as place outside of evangelical religiosity.

**Heteronormativity**

In her memoir, Klein tells the story of a female childhood friend who grew into her sexuality behind the closed doors of purity. Without providing much detail, Klein describes this friend as a teenager getting caught by her parents while sexually engaging with a girlfriend. Immediately, Klein transitions to this woman claiming purity shamed her queerness. In Klein’s description of this, she continues to uphold a heteronormative position in her post-purity story. First, the equating of sexual exploration and queer sexuality continues to uphold the idea of queerness being a perversion. Klein’s friend claimed the secrecy she kept about her sexuality was caused by purity culture, yet she and Klein never named homophobia as playing a role in the secrecy. Second, the “act” in which Klein’s friend engaged was continuously labeled a non-pure sexual act. While Klein aims to excavate and encounter purity throughout her book, this example continues to situate queerness as existing in a private sphere, continuously hinted at as an
outright sexual identity, yet never expressed openly. Instead of Klein’s friend experiencing shame due to purity discourse and homophobia simultaneously, her shame is pronounced by the insinuated queerness experienced. In *Sex Panic Rhetorics: Queer Interventions*, Barnard (2020) argues that even in spaces in which queerness is discussed, heteronormativity can rear its head and keep us panicked when regarding queerness beyond normative assumptions.

With a rhetoric of impurities lens, I posit that to examine queer stories of post-purity, we must excavate heteronormative articulations and continuously displace what is seen as normative. In doing so, we can encounter public articulations of queerness. This rhetorical process works with Morris’ (2007; 2015a; 2015b) work. Embracing impurities allows us to position sexuality and queerness as what they are, with no need to reposition them. Queerness must be written and seen as surpassing strict categories orchestrated by heteronormativity and queer sex panics. To critically analyze a text through a rhetoric of impurities, I examine what is left unsaid along with my own contextual experience with the text. Following both Morris’ (2015a) queering contextual criticism method and the acts of excavating and encountering purity, I endeavor to move past heteronormative readings of purity discourse. Shotwell defines normativity as the ways by which people “claim that a given way of being is good or beautiful, or to be endorsed” (p. 143). Therefore, to use a rhetoric of impurities in spaces of heteronormativity, I must excavate and encounter how we claim certain ways of existing in post-purity as being recommended, and other ways as being left behind. This requires a rhetoric of impurities to consider the purpose and role of individual transformations happening within a collective movement. While Klein’s memoir and specific story of her friend fit the collective movement of ExVangelicalism and post-purity, her recapturing of her friend’s queer turmoil with purity discourse fails to account for her friend experiencing both evangelical purity and
homophobia simultaneously in ways Klein does not personally capture in her Klein’s own post-purity story.

**White Feminism**

As heteronormativity and purity work hand-in-hand to silence experiences of sexuality outside of the normative, I argue that white-centric feminism has a similarly strategic relationship to purity. Purity discourse’s silencing of sexualities is not pertinent to only the silencing of non-heterosexual identities and bodies, but also bodies of color, bodies with disabilities, non-binary bodies, and transgender bodies. Mack et al. (2018) write, "The imposition of dichotomous gender is an ongoing and violent process of categorization and dehumanization that works in tandem with racialization and heterosexuality to marginalize subjects" (pgs. 97-98). Shotwell argues this process of categorization is a key element to purity and is “a key to colonialism” (p. 25). Purity endeavors to classify the levels by which bodies experience their histories, health, and harm. Even though feminist work explores purity’s impact, the classification of post-purity individuals’ stories, experiences, and trauma continues to center on white womanhood.

As argued throughout Chapters Three, Four, and Five, future examinations of purity discourse must consider how whiteness is strategically codified even in a post-purity story (Moslener, 2022; Moultrie, 2017; Natarajan et al., 2022; Schultz, 2021). Moslener (2022) equates purity as signifying the cultural meanings of white womanhood. In texts presenting ideals of national and sexual innocence, Moslener and DeRogatis (2015) argue that white women and white women in service to nuclear families are depicted. Not only upholding ideas of White Supremacy and colonialism, but purity also works to disembody women by situating their bodies as place. Through disembodiment, one’s understanding of self—their body, race, gender, and
sexuality—is severed. Hence, purity continues to function in post-purity spaces as white ignorance.

While post-purity stories are important to examine, Natarajan et al. (2022) and Anderson (2015) remind us that white women’s stories continue to be centered as purity culture both focuses on depictions of whiteness to be the carriers of purity and through disembodiment, severing cultural awareness of the white racial identity which adds to color-blind racial ideology (Neville et al., 2013). In the examination of racial rhetorics, Nakayama and Krizek (1995), write that whiteness often “elude[s] analysis yet exert[s] influence over everyday life” (p. 293). They argue whiteness is a spatial relation and is embedded in our identities. However, and as these scholars point out, merely including post-purity stories told from women of color’s positions is not the solution. From Chávez (2015), we understand how the rhetoric of inclusion still centers on whiteness and positions people of color as needing to be folded in and added as supplemental perspectives to white structures of knowledge. Therefore, a rhetoric of impurities is needed in future examinations of purity discourse so that we may excavate the implications of racial identity within the structures of post-purity and encounter new ways feminist scholarship can interrogate purity beyond the overbearing and often invisible category of whiteness. As Warren (2003) writes, “whiteness strategically works to erase its own tracks” (p. 86). When examining purity discourse, a rhetoric of impurities needs to be used to uncover how whiteness within post-purity is maintained as an everyday and normative cultural framework and relearn new ways of implementing feminist work to deconstruct purity that approaches purity as intersecting in its oppressive purpose.
The fourth space in need of a rhetoric of impurities lens is the college classroom. The concept of the student body as the object being positioned in need of learning a subject follows cultural classifications of pure learning (Freire, 2000; Shotwell, 2016). An example of this would be Warren’s (2003) case study of their own teaching. In their ethnography, Warren examines how the materiality of the body is used discursively in the classroom to perform power. This concept is not relegated to Warren only as other pedagogical scholars have examined the role of bodies and power in the space of the classroom (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; 2004; Palmer, 2017). I rely on Warren’s work as an example as they focus on the body as a rhetorical construct within the classroom space.

In Warren’s case study, they examine how the body is used in the classroom to enact borders between bodies of power (the educator) and marginalized bodies (students needing knowledge). First, the body is rhetorically structured through the discourse or communicative systems at play. Second, the body is constructed to be physically in need of this discourse. From this, and in addition to my work examining purity discourse and its use of the rhetorical body, it is easy to understand how purity exists in the classroom. Purity constructs the body of the learner as a body in need of boundaries for specific educational assessment to happen. Warren argues that the space of education provides “a lens through which to see productions of raced identities” (p. 37). In addition to this, I posit that a rhetoric of impurities should be used in spaces of education to understand how individualized pure identities are produced. For example, during our interview, Thea described how their experiences in the college classroom and counseling office were filled with lessons on how Thea’s body failed to be pure. Through a rhetoric of
impurities, the classroom space in which Thea was taught could be examined for how it further constructed purity discourse and used Thea’s body as place in need of purity teachings.

Purity discourse within the college classroom frames the student body as needing to learn information beyond their own context in order to obtain protection from a state of impurity, or unknowing. Freire’s famous analogy of education happening through the “act of depositing” shows how roles are constructed in the classroom between educator and student (p. 72). Through the pure boundaries between learning and teaching, the student and educator do not focus on intervention, transformation, or even disruption. Instead, they focus on their passive roles as subject and object. In Thea’s example, Thea was an object, in need of being taught purity. Thea’s school counselor was in charge of the subject. In this case, the subject was Thea’s own manifestation of impurities needing purification. While Thea’s counselor may have thought they were helping Thea find their footing on campus, their teaching continued to implement colonial categories of being. Lechuga (2020) warns rhetorical scholars of this happening in rhetoric courses when teaching students how to implement critical rhetorical theories. Scholars must problematize how we treat social movements and activists as objects of study. Whether exploring social activists or assessing students as they process class material, educators must see “expressions and actions...as complex thought.” Students’ learning is happening “in real time” as they immediately respond to what is difficult, confusing, and thought-provoking (p. 382). Therefore, when thinking of how to approach the college classroom from a rhetoric of impurities, educators must excavate and uncover how this type of learning transaction exists in their pedagogical process and encounter and relearn new modes of teaching, mentoring, and assessing curriculum.
I do not suggest that a rhetoric of impurities is needed as a lens in only these four spaces, nor is this the only theoretical lens needed to critically engage with these spaces. I complete this inquiry by presenting a case in which a rhetoric of impurities can be used to accomplish two overarching goals of my research. First, a rhetoric of impurities can bridge a gap between religious and gender communication research examining purity discourse and other critical areas of communication studies. Second, a rhetoric of impurities provides direction for further scholarship examining xenophobia and White Supremacy and its linkage to purity discourse. From the example of ExVangelicalism, we see how ExVangelicals use a rhetoric of impurities to break down their explorations of how bodies are constructed and strategically used to protect the sovereign. By understanding how a rhetoric of impurities is vital to ExVangelical post-purity navigations, we come to see how it is needed in spaces in which purity discourse continues to communicatively structure order and relationships.

A rhetoric of impurities does not celebrate physical harm caused by contamination, pollution, or other biophysical concerns. However, a rhetoric of impurities aims to liberate us from the ideology of purity that teaches us to be defensive, separated, and bound by categories. As Shotwell reminds us, “to be against purity…is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous” (p. 15). By joining and helping further construct the ExVangelical movement, ExVangelicals are taking an active stance against purity. Through ExVangelicalism, ExVangelicals present themselves as a group navigating post-purity and using the roles of place, space, and identification to formulate their liminal identity as it is labeled impure. As they embrace the multiplicity and ambiguity inherent in the liminality of impurity, ExVangelicals show how purity must be excavated and encountered. In doing so, ExVangelicals create a
rhetoric of impurities—making religiosity, identity, and purpose impure and open to transformations.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

During the fall of 2019, I was asked to step in as an adjunct and teach a Communication Studies Senior Capstone course for a mentor while they were on sabbatical. I was finishing my master’s thesis and preparing for my transition to the University of Memphis’ Ph.D. program and wanted experience with teaching in various settings, so I agreed and set out to work with and advise seven undergraduate seniors’ capstone theses. My wanting experience with diverse classrooms is the operative concept here as this was a class taught at a small, Midwestern Christian college located within the intersection of the Bible and Rust Belts. I have often reflected on this experience as one that allowed me to grow as an adaptive educator. However, upon completing this dissertation, I see another reflexive purpose to this experience. Before I knew the theoretical name and purpose of such, while teaching this capstone course, I was practicing a rhetoric of impurities.

At the time, I was quick to assume that my navigating a rhetoric of impurities meant I was failing or falling short as a professor. However, I was messing with boundaries between pure and impure research, student meetings, and lessons. I was rephrasing terminology in response to purity discourse’s defensive strategies heavily invoked on such a campus. I was struggling with my own identity. My identity as a graduate researcher doing religious and gender communication research, a professor not quite at home on their campus, and someone not ready to openly share the aspects of my identity that relate to my religiosity and sexuality made it hard to fit in with the students and faculty. A school such as the one I was teaching at that semester wanted me to be open with these parts of myself. However, I knew they would be used to place borders on my
body as my identity and purpose were fluid, liminal, and impure. To navigate this space, I had to continuously excavate the purpose of teaching a research course from a Christian curriculum and encounter ways to mentor my students. In doing so, I balanced multiple layers of who I was, who my students were, and how I could best serve them as their seminar professor. I messed up plenty of times, but that was part of the equation. I simply let myself be an impure professor on a campus striving for purity.

Because of my experiences as a student and adjunct professor at an evangelical college, I was struck by how I connected to participants' and memoirists’ stories regarding evangelical spaces while collecting data for this inquiry. Before this dissertation, I would have considered myself as an outsider to the culture of evangelicalism and ExVangelicalism—only understanding it as a text within my research. But as I argue in both Chapters One and Six, purity discourse is everywhere. Its curation of and through American evangelical politicism means all of us are operating from within its discursive web. From this work, I recognized that if anything, I am an outsider-within (Collins, 1991; Hendrix, 2011). I do not, nor have I ever identified as evangelical or ExVangelical, but I am placed within a post-purity movement, a movement working towards a rhetoric of impurities.

Researching religion—specifically American Evangelical Christianity—has always been somewhat scary to me. My first memory of indoctrination to the Protestant faith was my being baptized in the murky waters of Winona Lake, Indiana and immediately crying and clinging to the pastor’s shirt sleeve, furiously wiping the water from my eyes and nose.² While I was barely five years old, something in that memory reflects my current trepidation with this field of inquiry. Reading and engaging with decolonial scholarship and critical rhetoric in relation to

² Ironically, Winona Lake is the town wherein which American Evangelical Fundamentalism largely took root thanks to the Tabernacle movement hosted by Evangelist Billy Sunday (Marsden, 2006).
colonial Christianity has given me a codebook in which to decipher the many layers of purity panics that punctuate American Christian fears. How else can we critically engage with a system of doctrinal belief that simultaneously has a history of impacting people in a traumatic fashion while also giving people community and the opportunity to be greatly humbled by something larger than themselves? I am grateful to have studied alongside scholars who ponder this question in a variety of ways through their scholarship while at the University of Memphis. From my research, teaching, and personal history, I am no stranger to the possibilities born from critical insight into religious rhetoric—and specifically religious purity rhetorics.

To embark on the possibilities of critical insight, I approach ExVangelicalism as a community using storytelling to trace purity discourse and a reconstruction of impurity. While I aim to study discursive components of post-religious identity, I ultimately seek to uncover ways by which individuals re/present new ways of being impure by moving against normative structures of purity. From this inquiry, I partake in what MacLure (2021) names a “divinated approach.” As researcher, I remain open to what the data rhetorically implies. This allows me to recenter my approach around the messy nature of rhetoric that exists in everyday life. Instead of laboring to rationalize an answer to my research questions, I understand ExVangelicals and post-purity individuals as constructing their own theories of identity, belonging, and impurities. Furthermore, I utilize my critical perspective to offer insight into radical possibilities for social change.

As I was preparing for my comprehensive exams in May of 2022, I attended a month-long seminar hosted by the religion and politics podcast, “Straight White American Jesus” (Miller & Onishi, 2018-present). Sara Moslener led each meeting with a lecture, and an embodiment activity, and facilitated a group discussion. At the beginning of the first seminar
meeting, Moslener asked who in the room identified as an ExVangelical. From a glance, it seemed everyone but me had their hand raised. I began to begrudge the time and money spent on the seminar assuming it would simply become an ExVangelical sounding board and less of a critical discussion on purity discourse. However, towards the end of our meeting, Moslener reminded us that people brought up within purity culture, are taught to separate their body from the world. Within purity, one is disciplined into separating, countering, and silencing their body. With my notebook filled with notes and questions, I left that meeting thinking, we have a lot to learn from ExVangelicalism if we are going to talk about purity.
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Hello, my name is Karly Poyner-Smith and I am a Communication Studies doctoral candidate at the University of Memphis. My research lies at the intersection of identity, gender, and purity rhetorics. I often ask questions about the construction of agency through non-normative identities in relation to religious systems. I am currently collecting data for my dissertation in which I set out to explore the ExVangelical identity and how it wrestles with rhetorics of purity and belonging. I am hoping to hear more about these experiences through face-to-face interviews (in-person or virtual based on comfort and location).

If you or anyone you know fits my study (18+ years old and identifies as an “ExVangelical” or part of the ExVangelical movement), feel free to email me (klpoyner@memphis.edu) and I can provide more information and hopefully, set up an interview.
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

I first want to thank you for taking time out of your schedule to meet with me. As communicated previously, my name is Karly Poyner-Smith and this interview is part of my dissertation research examining ExVangelicalism and purity discourse. I have some questions that I’d like to ask about your identity as an ExVangelical, but I want to make sure you’re aware of your rights as a potential participant in this study. [Go over consent form and have them sign it.] As stated in the consent form, you have the freedom to end this interview whenever you’d like, ask to remove yourself from this study, and/or skip any questions that I may ask you. At the end of our time together, I have a list of resource for post-evangelical purity culture experiences that you can do with what you’d like to at your own discretion. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

1. When did you start to think about or consider the term “ExVangelical/ExVangelicalism?”
   a. (Back-up question) When did you learn about the term “ExVangelical/ExVangelicalism?”
2. Just say you are in a situation where you are asked to describe or explain your identity or the word “ExVangelical.” How would you do so? How do you describe or explain the identity or word and what it means to you to others?
   a. Specifically, how would you explain it to someone who is practicing evangelicalism?
   b. Specifically, how would you explain it to someone who is connected to ExVangelicalism?
   c. Specifically, how would you explain it to someone who is not connected with either evangelicalism or ExVangelicalism?
3. Do you see your role as an ExVangelical impacting something larger?
   a. (Back-up question) What does the term mean to you?
   b. (Back up question) What do you hope for with this identity?
4. Have you heard other ExVangelicals explain this identity or label differently? Can you explain why you think your definition of being an ExVangelical is different than other ExVangelicals you know?
5. What would be 2 turning points you experienced that, looking back, have impacted your current state as an ExVangelical?
6. Who or what has been the most helpful for you as you construct your identity as an ExVangelical?
   a. (Back up question) How do you long to be helpful to others with this label/movement?
7. If you could summarize the ultimate goal of the ExVangelical movement from your perspective, what would you describe it as?
   a. (Back up question) Do you think other ExVangelicals agree or disagree with your summary? How so?
8. What would you want people who may not know much about the ExVangelical movement to know about your identity and purpose?
9. Have you heard of the term purity? If so, how would you define it or explain the meaning of the term?
   a. (Back up question) How have you used this term?
b. (Back up question) How has this term been used?

10. (To ask until 8 participants have answered “Yes”) I have an additional part to my study that continues to explore what and how ExVangelicals think about purity. Would you be willing to take part in an additional study in which you keep a seven-day diary of your experiences with encountering purity?
   a. If they answer “Yes,” provide the diary file, walk them through the process, and communicate that you will follow up with them.
APPENDIX C
Interview Consent Form

Title
PRO-FY2023-348: Rhetorics of Impurities: ExVangelicalism as Excavating and Encountering Purity

Sponsor
(Lead Investigator) Karly Poyner-Smith, University of Memphis

Researcher(s)
(Faculty Advisor) Dr. Christi Moss, University of Memphis

Researchers Contact Information
(Lead Investigator)
klpoyner@memphis.edu

(Faculty Advisor)
cmoss2@memphis.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 15-20 people to do so.

**Key Information for You to Consider**

**Voluntary Consent:** You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this case study is to understand how individuals who identify as “ExVangelical” experience ongoing purity culture language. This study is part of a dissertation on religious communication and rhetoric. This particular study will add to current understandings of the ExVangelical movement, Western Christian deconstruction, purity culture, and the religious rhetoric.

**Duration:** It is expected that your participation will last anywhere from twenty to sixty minutes (20-60 minutes) for an interview. If you would like to continue in the study after the interview, I will ask if you would like to take part in participant diaries. If you choose to also partake in the participant diaries, I will provide you a Word document that prompts you to provide 7 diary entries about your day-to-day experiences with purity culture as an ExVangelical. This will be discussed more in depth at the end of our interview.

**Procedures and Activities:** During our face-to-face (whether in person or via Zoom) interview, you will be asked about your identity and experiences as an ExVangelical. Interviews will be recorded on
an audio recording device and then transcribed by the researcher/interviewer. I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name when transcribing, and any other identifying information such as other people, locations, or church/school names will not appear on any publications or presentations. After the interview, I will ask if you would like to take part in a “Participant Diary.” If you say, “yes,” I will provide you a Word document with 7 diary entry prompts for you to work on on your own time. After two weeks, I will reach back out to collect the participant diary and to schedule a final meeting. If, after the interview, you decided to not take part in the participant diary, I will still reach out to schedule a final meeting to discuss our interview. During this final meeting, I will explain how I interpreted either (a) your interview or (b) your interview and dairy entries. During this final meeting, you will be able to correct my interpretations so that I can check my analysis. From our interview to our final meeting, the research process should take about 1 month. Throughout this process, you can end the interview and/or decline providing the diary at any time.

Risk: Some of the foreseeable risk or discomforts of your participation include recalling painful or intimate memories. There may be possible repercussions if others learn you are involved in this study and sharing your identity. I will do my part to protect you and your involvement to minimize this potential risk. Before the interview begins, you will be walked through the consent form, and you are allowed to stop and/or leave the interview if you feel uncomfortable. You may also skip uncomfortable questions. At the end of the interview, I will provide you with several resources that you can pursue if assistance is wanted or needed.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to participants.

Alternatives: Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

Who is conducting this research?
Karly Poyner-Smith of the University of Memphis, Department of Communication and Film is in charge of the study. She is being guided by her faculty advisor, Dr. Christi Moss. There are no other research team members assisting during the study.

How long will I be in this research?
The research will be conducted either in person and virtually based on your location and comfort. Each interview will take about 20-60 minutes. At the end of the interview, I will ask if you are willing to take part in a “Participant Diary.” This diary is a Word document with seven blank entries and prompts that you can choose to fill out at your discretion. This option will be offered after our interview, and you can choose to opt out of this diary if you wish. After you take part in either (a) an interview or (b) an interview and a participant diary, I will reach back out to you to schedule a final meeting. During this final meeting, I will describe my takeaways from your interview or your interview/diary entries to see if you agree, disagree, or have any other questions or concerns. The entirety of the study should take about one month between the time we schedule an interview and the time we complete our final meeting—however, only 30 minutes to 2 hours during the span of the study will require your attention.

What happens if I agree to participate in this research?
If you agree you will be asked to take part in an interview after signing this consent form. After the interview you may decide whether or not you would like to take part in a “Participant Diary.” About a month or two after the interview (whether or not you also take part in a “Participant Diary”), you will meet with me again so that I may explain my interpretation of our interview or your interview/diary entries.

After the research is completed, I will email you the copy of the dissertation for your personal perusal if you desire. Below is the process of participating in this study:
If interested in the study, you may email me and we will set up an interview that will take place either in person or via Zoom depending on location and comfort. At the beginning of the interview, you will be walked through this consent form and will be able to ask any questions. Before you are asked any interview questions, you will choose a pseudonym. During the interview, you may choose to answer any of the questions I pose. You may skip any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can stop at any time. Some examples of questions I may ask include: When did you start to think about or consider the
term “ExVangelical/ExVangelicalism?”; Who or what has been the most helpful for you as you construct your identity as an ExVangelical? What would you want people who may not know much about the ExVangelical movement to know about your identity and purpose?, etc. The interview will be audio-recorded. One week after the interview, your audio recording will be deleted and only a transcript with no identifying information will be used for my analysis. Any identifying information given during the interview will be removed in the transcript of our interview so that you will remain anonymous. At the end of the interview, you will be asked whether you want to take part in a “Participant Diary.” This will be explained more in-depth at the end of the interview so that you have more information and can make your decision. The participant diary is a 7-day entry document that prompts you to write freely about your day-to-day experiences with purity culture as an ExVangelical. Just like the interview, you can opt out of the participant diary. About a month or two after your interview, I will reach out to you to schedule a final meeting. During this final meeting, we will meet (either in person or via Zoom) for 15-20 minutes so that I can describe how I am analyzing your interview transcript and ask if you agree or disagree with the different parts of my analysis.

**What happens to the information collected for this research?**

Information collected for this research will be used in the researcher’s dissertation regarding ExVangelical communication and rhetorics of purity. Your name will not be used in any of the writing, presenting, or publishing components of this study. Your identity will be kept anonymous. Only unidentifiable transcripts will be kept and used for future research or distributed in the researcher’s research method classes as teaching material. One week after your interview, the audio recording will be deleted.

**How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**

I promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best I can. Although you need to know about some limits to this promise. Measures we will take include:

- Consent forms will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office in a secure building on the University of Memphis’ campus for one year, and then will be transported via a personal locked filing cabinet in the home of the researcher for four more years. (A total of five years).
- After five years have passed, signed consent forms will be shredded.
- Audio files will be transcribed and all identifying information (names, locations, institutions, etc.) will be removed and chosen pseudonyms will be used within a week of the interview. Once transcribed, audio files will then be deleted. This will ensure that no transcription can be traced back to any participant.
- Only transcripts will be kept indefinitely for further studies relating to religious identity communication or for research methods teaching material.
- Interviews will take place either in person (and based on the comfort and location of the participant) or via Zoom (through my University of Memphis account).
- Only I will have access to all data.
- I am required to report the following if I suspect child abuse or neglect, or suicidal thoughts. TN Laws may require this suspicion be reported. In such case, I may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

**What if I want to stop participating in this research?**

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time—whether before, after, or during the interview or before, after, or during the diaries. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with me (the researcher) or the University of Memphis.

**Will it cost me money to take part in this research?**

If you decide to take part in the study virtually (via Zoom), there are no costs associated with participation in this research study. However, if you decide to take part in this study in-person, you may have to pay for the cost of getting to the interview site (your choice of coffee shop, library, park, etc.).

**What if I am injured due to participating in this research?**
If you believe you need immediate medical attention if you get sick during the study, you should seek immediate medical attention.
The University of Memphis does not have funds set aside to pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you got hurt or sick while taking part in this study. Also, the University of Memphis will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study.
Medical costs that result from research related harm cannot be included as regular medical cost. Therefore, the medical costs related to your care and treatment because of research related harm will be your responsibility. You do not give up your legal right by signing this document.

**Will I receive any compensation for participating in this research?**
You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

**Who can answer my question about this research?**
Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the lead investigator, Karly Poyner-Smith via email. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. I will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

As described above, you will be audio recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio recordings will be used for interview transcribing. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio recording as described.

_____ I agree to the use of audio recording.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)**

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Signature of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
APPENDIX D

Participant Diary

I, ___________________, consent to participating in a Participant Diary.

- I understand that I have complete agency over partaking in this study and that any identifying information I provide in my diary entries will be kept confidential by the researcher and will not appear in any publication or presentation of this study.
- I understand that the only people who will have access to my diary is the researcher (Karly Poyner-Smith) and their Ph.D. advisor (Dr. Christi Moss).
- I understand that at any time I would like to be removed from the study, I can contact the researcher via email and request to be removed. I trust that the researcher will respond and will remove/destroy my data and excuse me from the study.

Participant Signature: _______________________________________

Researcher Information: Karly Poyner-Smith, University of Memphis, klpoyner@memphis.edu
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Christi Moss, University of Memphis, cmoss2@memphis.edu

While your interview is helpful and will offer insight into the ExVangelical movement and ExVangelical experiences, I want to offer you an opportunity to use your own written words to present a more personal look into how you grapple with a post-purity lifestyle when you find yourself questioning/critiquing American evangelicalism.

In this packet, you will find that I have seven pages dedicated for seven entries of your own choosing. For two weeks, set aside a couple minutes to journal about your experiences as an ExVangelical confronting purity based on your conceptualization of “purity.”

This journal is your space, so you have complete control over how you want to journal your thoughts. Feel free to reflect on your definition of purity, how you have felt impacted or reminded of purity, how you have had to navigate evangelicalism, or questions that ran through your mind and how those impacted your sense of self, etc. For example, maybe you came across a reminder of “purity.” In this dairy, you could journal about the experience, how it reminded you of your definition of “purity,” and how you responded to or thought more about it. You are free
to write free-hand or type your entries. (If you choose to write free-hand, make sure your entries are written legibly.)

*If writing your reflections causes emotional disruption, below are some resources that might be of assistance.

- Divorcing Religion’s Religious Trauma Syndrome Resources:
  o [https://www.divorcing-religion.com/religious-trauma-resources](https://www.divorcing-religion.com/religious-trauma-resources)
- Dr. Camden Morgante’s Purity Culture Recovery Coaching page
  o [https://drcamden.com/purity-culture-coaching/](https://drcamden.com/purity-culture-coaching/)
- The Center for Trauma Resolution and Recovery’s Recommended Resources page
  o [https://www.traumaresolutionandrecovery.com/recommended-resources](https://www.traumaresolutionandrecovery.com/recommended-resources)

Once you have completed seven days of diary entries, feel free to email me (klpoyner@memphis.edu) a copy of this signed participant diary.
Institutional Review Board
Division of Research and Innovation
Office of Research Compliance
University of Memphis
215 Admin Bldg
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

May 3, 2023

PI Name: Karly Poyner-Smith
Co-Investigators:
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Christina Moss
Submission Type: Initial
Title: Rhetorics of Impurities: ExVangelicalism as Excavating and Encountering Purity
IRB ID: PRO-FY2023-348

Expedited Approval: May 3, 2023

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed your submission in accordance with all applicable statuses and regulations as well as ethical principles.

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. When the project is finished a completion submission is required
2. Any changes to the approved protocol requires board approval prior to implementation
3. When necessary submit an incident/adverse events for board review
4. Human subjects training is required every 2 years and is to be kept current at citiprogram.org.

For additional questions or concerns please contact us at irb@memphis.edu or 901.678.2705

Thank you,
James P. Whelan, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
The University of Memphis.