The space between: Liminal time within purity culture

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Abstract

Purity culture is an evangelical Christian approach to teaching sexuality and gendered relationship expectations to adolescents. Formal induction to purity culture often begins with an event that mirrors the opening of a rite of passage and is expected to culminate in heterosexual marriage, a ceremony that acts as a reintegration ritual and completes the rite. The author employs her positionality as a biracial Indigenous woman raised in purity culture to bring an Indigenous perspective to this topic. She uses autoethnography and an ethnographic look at data from a large-scale qualitative research project about purity culture's outcomes to argue that the intensity of the separation rite that introduced the participant to purity culture, the amount of time spent in a liminal purity culture space, the participants' acceptance of the role of "ritual agent," and how purity culture "ends" for a participant all significantly impact the way they experience purity culture.

Keywords: purity culture; Christianity; liminality; rite of passage; race

Introduction

Many of us formally entered purity culture via rituals designed to be memorable introductions to the pursuit of relational and sexual purity.[1] Whether we signed a card at an abstinence rally, made a pledge at a purity ball, or accepted a purity ring, these preliminal rituals were often rife with the language of exceptionalism. Induction rituals create a sense of being special. Set apart from our uncommitted peers, we weren't just teens not having sex; we were exceptional young people committed to "using our singleness to its fullest potential" for as long as it lasted.[2] But no one talked about what would happen if we got stuck there.

Much has been written about how purity culture infantilizes girls and women,[3] fosters sexual shame,[4] perpetuates rape culture,[5] and supports the Jezebel trope.[6] Therefore, this paper does not seek to define purity culture or elucidate its teachings. Rather, it is an autoethnographic deep dive into the experience of being an adolescent or young adult in the liminal space that is the time between committing to follow purity culture's tenets and reaching the age where one expects the promised conclusion of purity culture: a healthy marriage to an opposite gendered spouse, complete with great sex on the wedding night and beyond.

As a biracial, Indigenous woman who participated in—and perpetuated—purity culture induction rituals and teachings, my positionality offers something unique to purity culture literature up to this point: an Indigenous Native American perspective on purity culture. Using my own story and stories I have collected through my qualitative research projects, I examine purity culture by applying Arthur van Gennep's rites of passage model, with special attention to its Indigenous origins and parallels to Indigenous puberty ceremonies and rites of passage. I argue that the intensity of the separation rite that introduced a participant to purity culture, the amount of time spent in a liminal purity culture space, the degree of internalization of the messaging of purity culture, and how purity culture "ends" for a participant all significantly impact the way a given person experiences purity culture.

Gender

In purity culture literature, it is often assumed that participants in purity culture are girls or women. There is much work to be done toward understanding the impact of purity culture on boys and men as well as transgender, genderqueer, and nonbinary (TGNB) persons. Because I am a cisgender woman who is sharing my own story and because most of my research participants were identified as female at birth and socialized

female within purity culture, this article will be skewed toward the female experience. It is important to note that persons of all genders make and have made vows to sexual abstinence, and that the impact of an extended liminal period within purity culture is not limited by gender. When possible, I will share the voices of cisgender men and TGNB persons along with cisgender women's stories.

Liminality and rites of passage

Indigenous peoples around the world have always engaged in rituals performed at significant life transitions and ethnographers have long delighted in studying these rites.[7] Van Gennep's research on Indigenous coming-of-age rituals produced a structure for understanding rites of passage and introduced the concept of "liminality."[8] Van Gennep argued that rites are used by all cultures to demarcate transitions, and that these rites of passage can be further separated into pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal rites.[9] Within his model, liminality is the time between performance of the rite which separates the participants from the rest of the community and the rite designed to reincorporate them. Liminality is the in-between and the not-yet, the period during which who you are is undone and who you will be is not yet re-made.

Autoethnography and the decolonization of knowledge

Carolyn Ellis describes autoethnography as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)."[10] Autoethnography honors the life experiences of the researcher as a valuable source of knowledge.[11] Similarly, Indigenous women who are academic researchers emphasize the importance of story—our own and that of people whose stories we receive when we research—as an epistemological source that has been long oppressed by Euro-American scientific methodologies.[12] In choosing autoethnography for this work, I honor my heritage as an

Indigenous woman and employ a methodology that excavates and elevates the experiences of women impacted by androcentric rites of passage during of their purity culture experience.

The work of decolonizing education, research, and religion requires the introduction and acceptance of diverse forms of knowledges. As Sefa Dei notes, "Indigenous knowledges are experientially based and depend on subjective experiences and the inner workings of the self to generate social interpretations, meanings and explanations."[13] As an Indigenous researcher, I know that individual lived experience is complex and cannot be generalized, but I also know that the experience of one is not entirely disconnected from the experience of another. For generations, academic research has been done on and done to Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), women, sexual and gender minorities, and other marginalized persons. Academics have relied on Western philosophical traditions—mostly created by White European men—to gather, analyze, and create knowledge.[14] Employing autoethnography as a research method can, in some small way, begin the work of decolonizing academic knowledge. By respecting the way Indigenous people use stories to share wisdom, researchers push back against epistemological oppression, and correct for research done without considering the voices and experiences of marginalized people.

Positionality

In their 2022 article "Decolonizing Purity Culture: Gendered Racism and White Idealization in Evangelical Christianity," Natarajan et al. write, "the unique experiences of WoC [Women of Color] are often overlooked and undertheorized in purity discourse; however, purity culture cannot be properly understood unless race and ethnicity are central to the analysis, instead of marginal or non-existent."[15] For decades, the idea that race and ethnicity may have played a part in my experience of purity culture never

crossed my mind. Not until a very astute professor made a note in the margin of one of my papers asking me "why are all the people in your story White?" did I realize that not only was my experience of evangelical Christian purity culture very racially segregated, it is also possible that I was, in fact, the Woman of Color whose story was not being told. And so let us begin there.

My heritage is Cherokee/Irish on my mother's side and Irish/German on my father's. Though I am often read as White, I have always known that I and my family are Cherokee.[16] Like countless other Indigenous families, my ancestors converted to Christianity generations before I was born. Seeking protection through Christianization, they traded traditional ways of knowing and relating for the religion practiced by the European settler-colonizers who nonetheless rejected their humanity and stole their lands and homes, displacing them through forced relocation. My Euro-American family brought Catholicism with them as they moved west—a religious practice my father abandoned in favor of the more patriarchal evangelical Christian fundamentalism of my upbringing.

And so I was raised in an evangelical church practice where male leaders, pastors, and various educators viewed my Indigenous heritage as a barrier I must overcome. When I learned, on a visit to my tribal capital, that the Cherokee are traditionally a matriarchal people, I was given corrective lectures on the sin of women trying to have "headship" over men and the importance of following the God-given patriarchal social and family structure. My history texts taught that God had guided the genocidal invasion of North America and people like me should be grateful because this had provided my ancestors access to Christianity and saved them from the demonically influenced Indigenous religious practices of the pre-Columbian era.

My passionate commitment to purity culture during my teens was influenced by racial shame which especially manifested in the belief that I must work to prove myself more righteous than the "rebellious" (my father's word) women in my matriarchal line; women who ran their families without male supervision and engaged in sexual relationships as they pleased, without regard to Christian sexual ethics.

Race and purity culture

In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas writes that culture is "a series of related structures which comprise social forms, values, cosmology, the whole of knowledge and through which all experience is mediated."[17] In the case of purity culture, evangelical Christian theology and tradition about sexuality, gender, and race inform a definition of "purity" upon which the social and sexual rules of an entire culture are built. Schultz writes that "Though many White authors do touch upon racialized elements of purity culture discourse, it has not yet become commonplace for White people deconstructing their experience in evangelicalism and the evangelical movement to recognize the racialized origins of purity."[18] They go on to note that the very Whiteness of the churches that spawned purity culture—churches like the one I grew up in—is testament to both "White body supremacy" and to the segregation upon which these churches were founded.[19] Other authors have addressed the anti-Black racism of purity movements' foundations and of purity culture itself, so I will not repeat their work here.[20]

For me, the White body supremacy of purity culture manifested in racial shame that told me that performing purity culture's rules about relationships and sexuality perfectly was important to demonstrate that I was not one of the "merciless Indian savages" (as we are described in the Declaration of Independence) who did not practice

monogamous, heterosexual Christian marriage and sexual purity. I was different. I was pure. I was a *good* Indian.[21]

Throughout this article I will reference several authors whose books were foundational to my understanding of purity culture.[22] These are the authors whose books I read, re-read, and loaned to unwitting friends; whose messages I eventually internalized and shared as my own during my years as an abstinence-only educator and courtship advocate. One cannot have a conversation about purity culture without *I Kissed Dating Goodbye (IKDG)* coming up. Joshua Harris was a twenty-one-year-old homeschool graduate when he wrote *IKDG*, and though he became a controversial figure in the years after its publication, I had a lot in common with Harris. We were close to the same age, both home-educated by our parents, both passionate about being who we were told God wanted us to be. We were also both biracial in the White evangelical church and we shared a heritage of racial trauma; Harris's mother is Japanese and his grandmother was confined in an internment camp in California during WWII.[23] Emerging scholarship on purity culture highlights the influence of racism and White Christian nationalism on purity movements throughout Christian history; the same racist nationalism that led to the forced relocation and confinement of Japanese people into internment camps and forced Indigenous people to choose between hiding via assimilation or being relocated and confined to government-allotted reservations.[24] The homeschooling culture in which Harris and I were raised, which spawned the brand of fervent, earnest, dedicated purity culture adherents I discuss in this paper, was steeped in White Christian nationalism and very, very White. Black families were virtually nonexistent in our circles, and biracial people like Harris and myself were noticed and remarked on.

Qualitative research

In summer of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I launched my Purity Culture Outcomes research project. A comprehensive mixed-methods project that combines an extensive survey with in-depth semi-structured interviews, Purity Culture Outcomes is among the first qualitative research projects on purity culture not limited by geographic area, age, gender, orientation, or church denomination.[25]

With this project, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the mental, emotional, sexual, and relational impacts of purity culture that I had observed in my own and my friends' lives. I wanted to know how growing up in this culture affected our sexuality, relationship satisfaction, gender expression, marriages, and religious practices. I wanted to understand when and why purity culture seemed to work great for some people, and why it seemed to be so spectacularly damaging to others. So I developed a survey, built a landing page, got approval from my university's institutional review board, and released my fliers into the world of social media.

Response was immediate and overwhelming. In the first six hours, I received 141 survey responses, and 75 offers for interviews. By the end of the first week, 564 people had completed surveys, and 256 were eager to share their stories through in-depth interviews. In qualitative research, we consider everything to be data, and are constantly asking why, and how, and what does *that* mean? In this case, the message was loud and clear: a *lot* of people want to share their experiences with purity culture. And they have a lot to say.

Participants

In total, 1,328 people completed my survey during the 14 months it was open. From the beginning, it was clear that responses were skewed; most people were identifying their experience with purity culture as "extremely negative" and filling text

entry box after text entry box with their stories of why and how purity culture had harmed them. In an attempt to reduce volunteer bias and recruit some balance, I intentionally disseminated fliers to people and groups I knew were still supportive of abstinence-only sex education and/or participants in evangelical Christian churches. They, in turn, shared information about my project with their friends and family. These efforts did not shift the results significantly: of the 1,027 respondents who rated their experience with purity culture, 589 identified it as extremely negative, 283 as somewhat negative, and only 35 as extremely positive.

My participants were predominately female (n = 629, male n = 111), and predominately White (n = 606).[26] One hundred forty-four participants described themselves as either queer or genderqueer, with a significant portion of participants (n=332) answering "Yes" to the question "I consider myself to be a member of the LGBTQIA+ community."

In all, I performed 57 semi-structured interviews using an interview guide with questions such as: "Tell me about how you were introduced to purity culture," "What, if anything, was beneficial or positive about purity culture, for you?" and "How is purity culture impacting your sexuality or gender expression today?" I audio-recorded all interviews, transcribed and de-identified them, and began analysis.

Participants' rites of passage

I did not set out to ask participants about their experience of rites of passage. Stories of ritual introductions to purity culture emerged naturally in some interviews and were especially present in participants' text-responses in the survey section that asked participants to comment on their experience receiving a purity ring or making a vow of abstinence. Not all interviewees discussed receiving purity rings, participating in other rites of passage, or experiencing purity culture as a liminal time in their life. The

stories of those who did not have this experience are not present in this paper. I include here the voices of participants who experienced purity culture as liminal because for us purity culture began with an intentionally ceremonial separation rite, followed by certain explicit or unspoken expectations.

Purity culture as a liminal rite of passage

The patriarchal religious system that spawned purity culture only allows men to take the role of ceremonial leader. When I received my purity ring, it came from my father. Reimer, in her paper on purity balls, writes: "There are many coming of age rituals around the world that celebrate female initiation and a girl's entrance into adult society," and then argues that purity balls specifically, and purity culture more generally, is the opposite of a rite of passage. Rather than the women of the community welcoming a girl into her womanhood, she notes, purity culture initiations separate a girl from her mother and ask her to promise her father that she will wait to explore her sexuality until she is committed to a husband who will (presumably) guide her sexual discovery.[27] Ceremonies introducing teens to purity culture often mimic a rite of passage, but purity culture twists this rite by making it not about the incorporation of a child into adult community. Instead, purity culture's rites of passage elongate the liminal still-a-child phase of the rite, without providing a clear ending ritual of reincorporation, and this is damaging to participants.

Receiving a purity ring: My preliminal rite

I received my purity ring on a cold, brown Christmas day. Heat from the oven cast a post-breakfast halo of warmth. We were in that magical lull that is Christmas afternoon when no one is working, everyone has interesting gifts to play with, and you're too full to think about dinner.

"Let's go for a drive," Dad said, putting on his coat. I looked around, confused. This isn't part of Christmas. I wondered if I should be worried, but he didn't look upset.

"Okay," I said, shrugged myself into my coat, and followed him out the door.

The gravel road crunched under our tires, leafless trees stood stark against the grey horizon line, and he asked me if I've started noticing boys. If so, did I have any questions? I knew he was really talking about sex, and I wasn't ready to ask sex questions right there, in that car, on Christmas. Besides, I didn't really have any questions. I already knew I could get pregnant, since I started bleeding the previous year. I knew God wanted me to save sex for marriage, and I wasn't really sure what "noticing" boys implied, but I was pretty sure I wasn't doing it.

Eventually we found the river and parked near our favorite fishing spot. Dad pulled a ring box out of his pocket with the flourish of a gentleman presenting a marriage proposal. The box held a plain gold band—a wedding ring, I realized quickly—tucked between grey velvety folds.

"I'm sure you know what this is for," he said. I nodded and he reminded me that the ring represents my promise to protect my purity and save my virginity for my husband on our wedding day. Boys will want to have sex with me, he said, and I will have to guard myself from that. It will be my responsibility to stay pure. "Chaste," I said when I promised, because that's even better than being pure, and I wanted to be the very best. I wanted to be excellent.

I slipped the ring on, and Dad said he was proud of me for making this decision, but it wasn't really a choice. Committing to chastity is what I knew I was supposed to do, so of course I would do it; I wanted to please God and my father. Besides, being chaste is how I would stay safe from sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, and heartbreak. I was making a choice, at age 12, that I fully believed would guarantee me a

happy, healthy marriage within ten years. I could wait for that. I would be a virgin the day I got married, and my promise would be completed.

Decades passed before I realized that this moment beside the river was the beginning of a rite of passage during which I became a ritualized agent, embodying purity culture in my daily life and living for the culmination of my liminal time, which was promised to end in reintegration through heterosexual marriage.

My lack of Indigenous community connections and the historical erasure of my tribe's pre-Columbian practices deprived me of access to a sexuality-affirming Indigenous female puberty rite led by women elders.[28] Unlike rites of passage in Indigenous cultures, neither those initiating the rites introducing purity culture nor those of us who participated in them were in control of the ending of the rite's liminal period. I did clearly understand that receiving my purity ring marked the beginning of an in-between time that would end when I got married. I fully believed that following prescriptive behavior while waiting for that marriage would not only protect me from harm but would also make me a good woman, ready for her husband when the time came.

The Preliminal Rite

My level of understanding the significance of entering purity culture's in-between time is far from universal. One survey respondent wrote: "I was 13 years old, and my parents made a big deal about me getting a purity ring. I was excited about it at the time, but I feel like I didn't have a clue really what was really going on." Another noted: "being given a purity ring was almost a rite of passage in purity culture."

Purity ring ceremonies as father-daughter marriages

Threshold rituals including purity rings, like my own father's "proposal" often mirror marriage ceremonies. Catherine Bell writes that rituals "…will sometimes be

used to the point of creating certain impressions, but then stop short of provoking a controversy about its appropriateness."[29] In purity culture, the father is considered the head of the family, an authority over his wife and any children. In the case of female children, this authority was often assumed to continue until marriage, when that authority or "headship" would be transferred to her husband. This patriarchal structure is clearly illustrated by many of my participants' stories of preliminal rites. Many of the ceremonies they described seem rife with opportunity for controversy about appropriateness.

"I had a whole ceremony in my living room," one survey respondent described, "when my dad prayed and read from the Bible and then put the ring on me like a husband would his wife."

Another woman's purity ring ceremony had been even more explicitly modeled after a wedding: "I was walked down the aisle by my father and the pastor put the ring on my finger," she writes.

Yet another participant remembers being very unsettled by her experience:

> It was gross looking back on it. My dad took me out on a daddy daughter date which even then creeped me out a little, although I didn't know how to voice that. I wore my purity ring until I walked down the aisle when I handed it back to my dad. Please note I was not actually a virgin when I did this, and I did it at the request of my father.

Another described her experience in very negative terms:

> My purity ring was a joint gift from all of my family members on my 13th birthday. I had to sign a purity pledge in front of twelve of my family members that day. It was traumatizing.

Entering liminal time

I fell into the positive-experience category when it came to receiving and wearing a purity ring. I took pride in the idea that it marked me as someone committed to being chaste until marriage and loved wearing a representation of purity culture on my body.

In my twenties, when I found myself still single and waiting for sex, I renewed my commitment to purity culture—and distanced myself from the patriarchal nature of the purity ring experience—by swapping the gold ring my father had given me for a silver ring engraved with the words "Trust Me," in Hebrew. I wore that ring faithfully for another decade.

The experience of clinging to a purity ring or replacing it with a renewed vow after a certain amount of time had passed isn't uncommon:

> I wore [my ring] for about fifteen years. In college […] I started turning it around so the cross wasn't visible, but I still wore it, even long after I stopped believing in what it stood for, and after I started having sex (outside of marriage, oh my!). There was so much hopeful, longing energy caught up in that damn ring, it was hard to take it off.

"Hopeful, longing energy" is an excellent way to describe the spirit of purity culture messaging as I experienced it. Harris wrote extensively about the promises of purity:

> God isn't just saving us *from* sin […] He's saving us *for* a life of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, and self-control. Yes, there's sacrifice involved[…] He asks us to give up chasing the lustful desires that could please us temporarily. Yet on the other side of that sacrifice is freedom and true pleasure.[30]

These promised outcomes—freedom, love, pleasure, great sex, or some other pay-off—drove many purity culture participants to make purity pledges and stick by them with dedication, while the liminal phase of our rites of passage stretched longer and longer.

Within the liminal period

The transitional period between making a vow to purity and "completing" it by engaging in a heterosexual marriage ceremony is purity culture's liminal time. Those of us who completed a threshold ritual by vowing chastity or accepting a purity ring became, whether we knew it or not, "liminal entities."

Becoming tabula rasa, the blank slate

Liminal entities, in ritual theory, are considered to be a person in-between, a "blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group…"[31] In *IKDG*, Harris wrote that "building well sometimes means first tearing down," and detailed the relationships, beliefs and habits that must be surrendered in order to start this time "with a clean slate."[32] Key to this time period in purity culture is the idea of collecting a team of wise adults—relying especially on your parents—to help the liminal entity know how to navigate relationships, how to "discern God's will for your love life," and to keep you from having to " 'figure things out' on your own."[33] Ludy, Elliot, and Harris all emphasized following the advice of "wise adults" to the exclusion of our own insight, moral code, or sense of self.[34] Rather than imparting wisdom that will enable the participant to become their own healthy adult member of the community, purity culture's liminality requires an extended period of total surrender to the authority of older adults (and, for young women, surrender to the authority of men of all ages).

While having a group of wise adults on your team may feel like a beautiful way of collecting the wisdom of our elders and learning from them, that is often not how it

worked out for me or for my interviewees. My commitment to purity culture beliefs and vocal support of its ideals created a perceived invitation for adults to offer me "wisdom" any time they felt I was precariously near compromising the principles of chastity. I was called out for things like being seen in a public park while modestly dressed, sitting at a picnic table near a male friend from church, talking. For listening to Christian music that had a rock 'n' roll sound (because what if someone overheard the music, and thought it was a secular song about sex??). For taking leadership in church when maybe a man might have taken the role if I had sat quietly and waited longer. My advocacy for abstinence-only education and work to promote chastity among my peers was only supported because I did it under the "headship" of my father, and with his blessing. Even then, I was often grilled about whether I had sought a young man to take leadership of the organization I developed and was leading, and if I would be willing to surrender it to a man if one appeared and wanted to lead. And what would I do if I married, and my husband wanted me to stop leading ministries? Could I submit to him? It was exhausting to be at everyone's moral beck and call, and constantly submitting to the beliefs and authority of others delayed the development of the personal moral codes, beliefs, and standards of behavior that I would need as a healthy adult.

I was far from the only one who had these experiences. Comments often focused on whether or not a young woman drew attention to herself by her clothing or behavior, and sometimes the commenter assumed authority to comment just by virtue of being male, as this female participant remembers:

> I even had a, a guy in my youth group come and tell me that, um, my dresses were too short and, um, that I, I was being immodest and that I needed to dress more like his sisters. I was often reprimanded for being too loud and for talking over the guys in our youth group or trying to get their attention, which I wasn't

> doing, but, you know, I was stealing attention away from, from other people[...] So there was lots of little nit picking about, you know, the way I dressed or, you know, I come off stage [after playing music during a church service] and they'd be like, 'you raised your hand, [while singing] at one point and we can kind of see a lot of your legs.'

Within the milieu of purity culture, everyone had opinions about how we liminal entities should inhabit our bodies and our world. We were told what we should wear, read, and listen to, advice ostensibly intended to help us reduce our sexual interest and extinguish sexual desire while also promoting the development of proper theological orientation. The offering of opinions about behavior and clothing were often impacted by the physical development of my participants. One of my interviewees, a woman with an ample bosom, a radiant smile, and a delightful laugh, described her experience and its impact.

> So flirting was bad. Um, distracting men was bad. Anything could be interpreted as flirting, especially in the homeschool group I was in. Just talking to the guy. It could be, I could get whispers about, 'Oh, you're flirting'[…] there was like this fear of like seeming flirtatious. There's this internal fear of, 'Oh, I'm going to distract him.' So any sort of normal and organic way of interacting with…a boy I may have found attractive at the time was—I had no options. So I didn't, for years. *laughs* And that's that kind of spiraled into like the, the hub of my mental issues where I, I couldn't talk to men for years.

Another interviewee also spoke of her struggle with guilt around clothing: "If I wear clothes that actually seemed to get people's attention, that's bad, but otherwise I don't exist and that's miserable and depressing."

When the blank slate isn't White

Women of Color [WoC] within purity culture's liminal phase are subject to the same unsolicited advice, comments, and judgements that White women and girls experience. However, the intersection of our racial identities with our role as a liminal purity culture subjects within predominately White, segregated churches amplifies the experience and magnifies the impact. For me, the racialized impact predominantly manifested in frequent accusations that I was taking leadership roles from men and not staying in a role that was considered appropriately submissive to male authority. Conformance to complementarian gender roles is fundamental to purity culture, and while I performed many other purity culture requirements to perfection, I couldn't seem to keep myself from exercising my inherent leadership skills or applying logical reasoning and common sense to accepted church rules in a way that was interpreted to be both too-masculine and rebellious.

Because my response pool was so overwhelmingly White, my original round of interviews only included one Black participant. Talking with her it immediately became clear that her experience was unlike any of the 45 people I had interviewed so far. "I had never experienced racism and, like, anti-black racism that directly ever in my life," she said of her experience in the college youth group where she was introduced to purity culture. "[T]o just be shamed and have, you know, White women ask me 'How many men have you slept with?' Like, without knowing anything about me and just assuming." The Jezebel trope, which has been widely studied and written about in this context, is a way of thinking about Black women that assumes hypersexuality, seduction, and sexual availability.[35] Subsequent interviews I performed with Black women paralleled this first: they were often the only Black person in their church or youth group, and were frequently the subject of sexualized accusations, assumptions, or comments.

The form and content of the racialized comments WoC are subject to during the liminal phase of purity culture differs depending on the flavor of racism in play. A Black/Latina biracial woman I spoke to during my second round of interviews explained this:

> So being Latina […] there's that stereotype of "Latinas are sexy" […]because of the, the curves of our body. Um, we just exude this sexiness. So tied in with purity culture: you can't be too sexy. If you're too sexy, you're [causing] your brother [to stray] so your skirt can't be too tight […] It has to be A line. You can't paint your butt. Um, your shirt can't be too tight cuz it can paint your breast. Well, I have huge, I have a huge ass and I have a huge breasts, no matter what I wore, it was immodest.

Being accused of "causing men to stumble" is a common experience for young women within purity culture but being a racial or ethnic minority in the predominately White evangelical church triggers additional surveillance and comment, likely to come from all sides. The Latina interviewee continued:

> …just the microaggressions I experienced in the White church. Um, like, um, it's a Baptist church. You're not supposed to dance, but in Hispanic church we move side to side. Like we do dance. It is just a thing that we do to worship God. And, um, I was told I was moving my hips too much. It was distracting to the men and I'm like, how am I moving my hips when I'm going side by side, it is not moving of the hips like salsa, but it's that microaggression, you know, like, um, being told I was too loud. So I was distracting […] I was dishonoring God because other people were distracted by me and not worshiping God […]it was a constant state of, of uncomfortability. So you just, just kind of wore as drab as possible and just kind of hope that you survive the interaction and go about it.

Also present in my own experience and in the stories of the WoC I interviewed is the ever-forefront concern about being "a good girl." Again, White persons socialized female in purity culture also feel this pressure, but BIPOC women are starting at a disadvantage. Because I'm Indigenous, I carry the weight of being the descendant of people who practiced matriarchal and pre-Christianized sexual and relationship structures. For Black women, it's the Jezebel trope. For my Latina participant, it was this idea that her presence in the world was automatically more sexualized than a White woman's would have been. Whether we believe it consciously or not, our culture—purity culture—says that we have to work extra hard to be a "good girl" to reach the threshold of purity where White women start.

One of the most striking findings in Natarjan et al.'s work, is the internalization of Eurocentric associations with purity; when asked to close their eyes and visualize the "ideal pure woman," five of the nine participants noted that they envisioned a thin, White woman. [36] Though there are multiple contributors to a finding like this, years spent living within the primarily White evangelical purity culture as WoC whose bodies are constantly subject to racialized scrutiny and comment by the people around them—an activity that is prescribed by purity culture and explained by liminality—surely plays a significant role.

The end of liminal purity culture: failure or reintegration

Like a Mescalero Apache girl entering the tipi for her 'Isánáklésh Gotal (puberty rite), young people making a purity pledge expect it to begin a temporary state.[37] When I accepted a purity ring from my father and promised chastity, I did not foresee being still single at thirty and unsure what to do with sexual desire that had awakened despite all my work to avoid it. I didn't expect to have held myself under the authority of male pastors and elders for so long that I was unable to recognize myself as fully *woman* and

still perceived myself as “a girl”. Purity culture was a liminal space for me; it took me out of the normal process of developing sexually and socially and created an in-between space that I had no idea how to leave but couldn’t get past without exiting.

Committed Ritualized Agents

Purity culture initiates such as myself were often deeply committed to our decision to remain pure until marriage. “I was fully on board with Christian purity culture,” one survey respondent wrote. “I read I Kissed Dating Goodbye and highlighted it multiple times. I took a purity/abstinence pledge. I had a purity ring in lieu of a class ring that I wore on my left ring finger like an engagement ring. I was sold.” However, my study found that receiving a purity ring or signing an abstinence pledge did not guarantee the desired result: sexual abstinence and a pursuit of purity until marriage. Over sixty percent of the 1021 Purity Culture Outcomes survey respondents who responded to the question “Did you make a formal vow or promise to remain pure until marriage?” answered yes (n = 617). However, sixty-four percent of vowed respondents became sexually active before they were married, thirty percent waited until marriage, and 6 percent are still waiting. This rate of sexual activity is consistent with research on the effectiveness of virginity pledges in the general population, [38] and raises the question: If threshold rituals such as the ceremonial gifting of a purity ring or the signing of an abstinence vow do not actually guarantee sexual abstinence long term, why do evangelical Christian parents continue to perform them? Bell illuminates this question when she writes about the function of ritual in religious practice:

> The ultimate purpose of ritualization is neither the immediate goals avowed by the community or the officiant nor the more abstract functions of social solidarity and conflict resolution: it is nothing other than the production of

> ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex micro relations of power. [39]

Whatever ritual components they incorporate, the separation rites that introduce children to purity culture serve one purpose: to produce a group of "ritualized agents."

These agents are young people like I was, committed to using my body to produce, maintain and preserve sexual purity until participating in the reintegration ritual of heterosexual marriage. During the liminal period of "waiting for marriage," these ritualized agents serve as markers for Evangelical communities, identifying them as ideologically different from other Christians. This sense of "otherness" in turn lends the community an aura of exceptionalism and brings with it perceived power.

In my family and community, the expectation that adolescent children and young single adults would embody purity, modesty, and conservativism was explicit. I knew I was representing my family, my church, my religion, and the beliefs of everyone who supported purity culture's tenets every time I stepped out my door, in every interaction with a member of the opposite sex, and especially in every interaction with someone outside our religious circles. For me, this expectation came with the extra weight of being sure I wasn't behaving in a way that communicated disrespect toward male leadership, because that would indicate an attachment to those rebellious women in my maternal, Indigenous lineage.

Failing the purity culture rite

The liminal phase of purity culture's rite of passage includes three key elements: a period of separation marked by a narrative of exceptionalism, becoming *tabula rasa*, the blank slate to be written on by the community, and an expectation of celibacy which

will be completed when heterosexual marriage is accomplished. The purity culture rite can fail if any of these three is disrupted.

Failed exceptionalism

It is remarkably easy to fail at being a ritualized agent who is viewed as exceptional and contributes to the exceptionalism of their community. This is especially true because for many of us, the rules that had to be followed to be successfully exceptional changed constantly. There were, of course, some clear ways to fail at being part of the exceptional group. Intentionally starting to engage in sexually activity was high on the list, but so were things like riding in a car alone with a boy, or listening to music that someone believed didn't honor God or going off to college and joining the "wrong" college ministry, or even something as banal as cutting your hair in a way that didn't comply to gendered purity culture ideals.

Queer people and BIPOC especially struggle with failing purity culture by failing to be exceptional. This is because we start behind our White, straight peers, but also because not being White (or straight) enough isn't something we can control, nor is it something that will ever change. A person can choose to expend energy daily, trying to be Whiter, or more Euro-American, or more straight. But when one still fails to be viewed as part of the "exceptional" group--the group that's performing purity culture correctly and making the community look exceptional--an overwhelming sense of failure is inevitable.

Failing to be a good tabula rasa

A blank slate can only be continually written on if it remains blank. If an expectation for success during the liminal period of purity culture is that one remains the tabula rasa, it follows that one must not develop independent thought, beliefs, opinions, or critical views. A person who completes the liminal time in purity culture

successfully arrives at marriage without having developed their own independent moral compass, without understanding who they are and what they want, and without knowing how to trust their own intuition and knowledge of the world. A woman fails at being tabula rasa when she wears yoga pants outside after being told not to. She fails when she asserts that moving her hips is just what Latina women *do* in church. She fails every time she has an independent thought or belief and follows it without asking for male permission or approval.

Failure of celibacy

When rites of passage include celibacy, it is common for "the resumption of sexual relations" to become a ceremonial sign of completion of the rite.[40] When the promise to preserve ones' sexual purity for marriage ends in a (heterosexual) "biblical marriage" commitment between two people who have postponed their sexual debut until that day, the purity culture rite of passage comes to its intended conclusion. This may produce results that feel satisfactory to participants who have this experience. One interviewee explained, "I'm just really happy that my husband is the only person I've ever had sex with […] the only person I have all of my happy memories with."

However, when years spent in the liminal state of temporary celibacy do not end in the promised marriage ceremony or are brought to a premature end by sexual assault, severe mental and emotional consequences are inevitable.

For many respondents, the teachings of purity culture exacerbated the trauma of having experienced a sexual assault. "My value as a woman was connected to my sexual purity in a way that destroyed my self-image when I was the victim of rape and no longer pure," one wrote. Another noted, "Even after having sexual activities forced upon me, I felt guilty and ruined for being a part of that [sexual activity]."

Complex failures

In some participants' stories, we see a combination of reasons for failing to complete the purity culture liminal period successfully:

> In my case, there was so much emphasis on not kissing that I ended up having oral sex before I ever kissed anyone on the lips […] All my romantic relationships were stunted. Rape was hidden out of shame. I couldn't even have sex the first almost 5 years of marriage because of vaginismus and couldn't talk to anyone in the church about it without being told I wasn't really married or I was demon possessed.

Participating in a sexual debut (in this case, oral sex) before marriage, and then not experiencing the happy marriage full of good sex that was promised by purity culture is unfortunately a common story among my participants.

Another all-too-common story is that of participants who saved their purity…and saved their purity…and kept saving their purity. One male participant wrote: "I actually outlasted my purity ring. How depressing is that, I literally wore it thin until it broke." Like this participant, I found myself still in the liminal part of a rite of passage while trying to go on with my life as a single adult: starting a career, buying a home, and wondering what I did wrong, or what was wrong with me, to cause purity culture to fail.

For committed purity culture adherents unable or unwilling to walk through a traditional reintegration ritual via marriage, the liminal period of "saving sex" can stretch years, decades, or a lifetime beyond when it was expected to end. Unlike Indigenous rites of passage, those initiating the purity culture rite of passage do not have control over the ending. Purity culture promised protection it could not provide; sexual assaults happened despite our commitment to chastity. We experienced heartbreak despite pursuing sexual purity. Purity culture also could not provide the happy, healthy,

heterosexual marriages it promised. A commitment to purity culture and a desire to be married could not automatically create this ending even for committed ritual agents of purity culture. Natarajan et al. writes that women in their study "…shared how purity culture limited their options in finding a life partner, levied a harmful and emotional toll on their mental health because of the unfulfilled purity prosperity gospel, and tasked them with the responsibility of changing societal perceptions of Black women promulgated by white supremacy propaganda."[41]

Consequence of failure

My commitment to purity culture did not provide me with a fairy-tale romance or an early marriage. Nor did it stop me from experiencing racist accusations about the influence of my Indigenous heritage, no matter how hard I worked to be good enough to overcome it. My time in liminal purity culture did leave me struggling for autonomy and the ability to be the leader of my own life in a system that distrusted women who were not under the authority of a husband or father.

Rites of passage are meant to be completed. In the case of purity culture, the expectation of the community was that we would commit to sexual and relational purity, would make ourselves available to the shaping of the community, and then would marry at an age (and to a gender) that was judged to be appropriate. To fail to complete this process makes you an aberration. Thomassen writes that it's possible for "individuals [to] remain 'dangerous' [for life] because of a failed ritual passage."[42] Within the closed culture of the evangelical Church, research participants told stories of rejection for reasons including gender identity and sexual orientation, experience of sexual assault, remaining single beyond the life stage that purity culture expects, and divorce after being married within purity culture. The purity culture adherent cannot control these variables, but they prevent the completion of the purity culture rite and

those who do not complete a rite are viewed as dangerous by the culture that initiated that rite.

A new reintegration

If purity culture is a rite of passage with an extended liminal period, the impact of failing to complete the ritual passage can only be redressed by reintegration, which should be in the form of a ritual and should be as public as the separation ritual was. "The aim," Thomassen writes about reintegration, "is to return to conditions of stability and normality. This happens by forging a new identity in the individual case, reflecting a shift of one's position within the social order."[43]

The challenge of leaving purity culture as an adult for whom purity culture's promises have failed is the challenge of forging a new identity after years of living as a ritualized agent whose primary purpose is to prove the exceptionalism of a group that may no longer accept you at all. In a traditional rite of passage, reintegration rites would be a moment celebrated by the community that brought you into the rite of passage in the beginning. If you are someone who has tried, and failed, to complete purity culture's rite of passage, exiting the rite of purity culture as a full, adult member of the community who initiated the rite may not be possible. This is especially true if your new, adult identity is rejected by adults and authorities who still support the theological and social tenets of purity culture. One genderqueer interviewee talked about this transition when they said,

> …too much of my identity is about what life was like as a woman in purity culture [...] I always will be, I think, sloshing back and forth between a fairly masculine presentation and interaction with the world and wow, very much a woman, do not whistle at me, or I will dissolve into tears. Uh, I'm gonna have to figure out how to assert myself and have a voice...

This is work that takes a lot of time and energy, and people often seek support or companionship for the process. This can come in the form of a community that replaces the evangelical community they were raised in, can sometimes include a supportive family system, and often includes a psychotherapist, counselor, or other professional support person. Even then, fully embodying a new identity that takes the place of one's previous identity as a ritualized agent can be a challenge, as the interviewee went on to describe:

> There's an ongoing undertone, um, kind of like a song that's stuck in my head all the time of just knowing and remembering what the rules were and knowing that I'm choosing not to follow them. But for me, I think because my purity culture inclusion was so dramatic […] that deconstructing it had to be everything I was thinking about for a while, which means that my day-to-day life now is very, like, I got here on purpose and with reasons and one step at a time, and so I'm actually very peaceful now, I think, um, thanks to that process and, uh, five years of therapy on the subject.

My own journey to a new identity and place in the social order has included a lot of working to undo beliefs about what it means to be a biracial Indigenous woman, and how to learn to trust my own wisdom when it conflicts with external voices that speak with presumed authority. Addressing the internalized impact of the White nationalist heritage of purity culture is additional work that must be done by People—especially Women—of Color who are exiting purity culture's liminality: an additional burden that needs to be given more attention in future research on purity culture.

Conclusion

For a rite of passage to succeed, the social order must shift, and a new position must be created for the new adult being integrated into the society. For some

participants in purity culture, this happened as promised: they entered a heterosexual, monogamous marriage and remained happily married. However, other participants experienced purity culture as a promise that failed to deliver, a liminality extended and rite of passage incomplete. Those participants are often viewed as dangerous by the culture that created the purity culture rite of passage and they face the hard work of deconstructing who they were and re-creating themselves as a new person with a new identity—one that is often linked to a community outside of evangelical Christianity and far from purity culture. This process is difficult, may require developing a new community or recruiting professional support, and though it produces an adult who is working to fully embody their new identity, the impacts of purity culture often linger and must continue to be addressed.

Notes

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[1] Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy*.

[2] Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, 84; Ludy and Ludy, *When God Writes Your Love Story*; Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Elliot, *Passion and Purity*.

[3] Gish, "Producing High Priests and Princesses"; Gish, "Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism."; Fahs, "Daddy's Little Girls."

[4] Gish, ""Are You a 'Trashable' Styrofoam Cup?"; Klein, *Pure*; Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church*.

[5] Allison, *#ChurchToo*; Klement, Sagarin, and Skowronski, "The One Ring Model"; Klement and Sagarin, "Nobody Wants to Date a Whore."

[6] Schultz, Olivia, "Purity Culture's Racist Fruit: Centering the Voices of Black Womanists and Feminists in the Deconstruction of Purity Culture"; Natarajan et al., "Decolonizing Purity Culture"; Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*; Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*.

[7] Cutcha R. Baldy, *We Are Dancing*; Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*; Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*; Shapiro and Talamantez, "The Mescalero Apache Girls"; Mahdi, Foster, and Little, *Betwixt & Between*; Markstrom and Iborra, "Adolescent Identity Formation."

[8] Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*; Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*; Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. *The Rites of Passage* was originally published in French as *Les Rites de Passage* and not translated into English until 1960, after the author's death.

[9] Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 11.

[10] Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, "Autoethnography," 273.

[11] Chang, "Autoethnography"; Iosefo, "Moon Walking."

[12] Brave Heart et al., "Women finding the way"; Mankiller, *Every Day*.

[13] Sefa Dei, George J., "Rethinking the Role of Indigenous Knowledges in the Academy."

[14] Sefa Dei, George J.

[15] Natarajan et al., "Decolonizing Purity Culture," 4.

[16] To be clear, in an era of academics claiming Indigenous heritage for decades and then retracting their claims as not-documentable, falsified, or based only on family stories: I am a registered member of The Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma, with ancestors documented in the Dawes Rolls. One of my grandfathers, several generations removed, was forcibly relocated during The Removal (also known as The Trail of Tears), which is how much of my family ended up in North Eastern Oklahoma. In 2019, while visiting the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., I was pleasantly surprised to see a familiar family photo on display: my great, great aunt, Ruth Muskrat Bronson whose poem, Bronson, Ruth Muskrat, "The Trail of Tears," is credited with bringing attention to the Indian Removal Act's impact on American Indians around the United States and who was a well-known and fervent defender of Indian rights throughout the twentieth century.

[17] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 129.

[18] Schultz, Olivia, "Purity Culture's Racist Fruit: Centering the Voices of Black Womanists and Feminists in the Deconstruction of Purity Culture," 4.

[19] Schultz, Olivia.

[20] Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Natarajan et al., "Decolonizing Purity Culture"; Schultz, Olivia, "Purity Culture's Racist Fruit: Centering the Voices of Black Womanists and Feminists in the Deconstruction of Purity Culture"; Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*. The work of scholarship on purity culture, race, racism, purity movements, and Christian nationalism is ongoing. The authors listed above are a great place to start, and I expect we will see more scholarship on this topic soon.

[21] Miranda, *Bad Indians*. Though this book is more about racialized religious abuse than purity culture, I consider it required reading as an introduction to the impact that Christianity has had on Indigenous peoples across the American continents. This book shattered me in all the

best ways, and the author's work on the concept of the Bad Indian has significantly informed my understanding of where my own internalized racism came from, and how to begin to exorcise it.

[22] Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*; Harris, *Not Even a Hint*; Ludy and Ludy, *When God Writes*; Elliot, *Passion and Purity*.

[23] Harris, Joshua, "Trip to Japan."

[24] Natarajan et al., "Decolonizing Purity Culture"; Klement, Sagarin, and Skowronski, "The One Ring Model"; Allison, *#ChurchToo*; Moslener, *Virgin Nation*; Newland, "Federal Indian Boarding School."

[25] Manning, "Exploring Family Discourses About Purity Pledges"; Manning, "Examining Health and Relationship Beliefs in Family Discourses About Purity Pledges"; Klein, *Pure*; Natarajan et al., "Decolonizing Purity Culture." Manning interviewed thirteen families (in a single community) in which at least one daughter wore a purity ring and had signed a purity vow, and Klein incorporates interviews and academic research in her analysis of the impact of purity culture on people's bodies, health, sexuality, and identity. Natarajan et al. was published after my qualitative project was begun.

[26] Not all participants completed demographic questions. The numbers listed are totals of those who selected race, gender, or orientation options. Other participants identified as Latinx (n=30), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (n=21), Black or African American (n=19), American Indian or Alaskan Native (n=11), and Asian (n=6).

[27] Christina Reimer, "The Taboo of Virginity", 218.

[28] Cutcha R. Baldy, *We Are Dancing For You*.

[29] Bell, 206.

[30] Harris, *Not Even a Hint,* 57. Emphasis in the original.

[31] Turner, *The Ritual Process, 103*.

[32] Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye,* 111-19.

[33] Ludy and Ludy, *When God Writes Your Love Story,* 187-93.

[34] Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*; Ludy and Ludy, *When God Writes Your Love Story*; Elliot, *Passion and Purity*.

[35] Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*; Schultz, Olivia, "Purity Culture's Racist Fruit: Centering the Voices of Black Womanists and Feminists in the Deconstruction of Purity Culture"; Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*.

[36] Natarajan et al., "Decolonizing Purity Culture."

[37] "Rites of Passage."

[38] Rosenbaum, "Patient Teenagers?"; Rosenbaum and Weathersbee, "True Love Waits"; Barnett, Martin, and Melugin, "Making and Breaking Abstinence Pledges."

[39] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice,* 221.

[40] Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

[41] Natarajan et al., "Decolonizing Purity Culture, 10."

[42] Thomassen, 90.

[43] Thomassen, 92.

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