Rhetoric and Networked Religious Identity:
Raised-Evangelical Social Media Users Writing Back in 2020

by

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Dedication

First, for Mom and Dad, who always believed I could.

Foremost, for writers and seekers, one and the same.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Abstract

This qualitative and ethnographic study examines the social media writing of American millennial raised-evangelicals who were active on Facebook, Twitter, and/or Instagram in "long 2020." All of these writers considered some or all of their social media activity to be "writing back"– posts, comments, and engagement that in some way pushed back on, raised questions about, or presented alternatives to the political and religious orthodoxies of their white evangelical communities of origin. Focusing on thirteen writers, sampled to maximize demographic range, I bring together scholarship from digital studies, religious studies, and writing studies to consider how raised-evangelicals used social media writing to reconfigure their religious identities during the period December 2019 to January 2021, which comprises two presidential impeachments, COVID-19 lockdowns, a presidential election, widespread protests against police brutality, and an insurrection at the U.S. capitol. It advances from the premise that "writing back" to white evangelical communities and connections is itself a religious practice.

Data collection for this study consisted of a survey with more than 230+ complete responses, 26 interviews with 13 participants, and social media observation, including the collection of 870+ posts across three platforms. Analysis of the data led to several conclusions. First, I intervene in debates about the nature of white evangelicalism to contend that for raised-evangelicals, any definition of the term tells a story about the past; the terminology of white evangelicalism offers its raised-evangelical users a shorthand to name the world of their childhood and their distance from it as adults. Second, I argue that writers drew on the resources of their evangelical childhoods to navigate algorithm-mediated social media writing. "Witness," in particular, operates as a flexible

decision-making frame for negotiating tensions between the twin beliefs that social media is both a danger and a tool for growth, as well as a synthesis for the rhetorical work of speaking about one's convictions in an environment where audience reception is necessarily uncertain. Third, I describe two patterns in participant writing: *empathy*, or the practice of public self-reflection and self-disclosure around position changes, struggle, and difficult emotions, a phenomenon I turn to the work of Kenneth Burke and Lisa Blankenship to understand; and *endorsement*, a simultaneously algorithm-aware and algorithm-agnostic practice in which participants shared the rhetorical work of others in order to advance their questions, concerns, or critiques about white evangelicalism and the wider web of conservative religiosity, right-wing politics, and conspiracy thinking.

Finally, this dissertation posits that in a digital-first, post-2016 and -2020 landscape wherein denominations and the category of "evangelical" itself are losing purchase, American religious identity–particularly for those entangled with white American Protestantism–can be usefully understood as networked. I introduce two principles by which participants curated the religious leaders, writers, thinkers, meme pages, and collectives, active and long-dead, that populated their networks: *engagement* and *discernment*. In an era wherein political polarization and religious extremism stress American institutions, from churches to democratic mainstays, this dissertation's findings suggest that a number of raised-evangelicals in the United States have used social media to forecast and try out alternative religious identities. Their ability to sustain, resource, and institutionalize those experiments may have a substantial impact on the nation's public life in the decades to come.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

      "You're the only person I know who goes to church anymore," my friend told me. We'd met in seventh grade at our private Christian middle school and gone to high school and college at institutions likewise associated with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the small Protestant denomination to which our families both belong. We were talking about extended family members' refusal to wear masks to church during the COVID-19 pandemic, but this statement could just as easily have emerged in another text exchange–our iMessage history covers the impact of student debt and climate change on our decisions about the future, negotiating the anti-LGBTQ views of many members of our home communities, tense Facebook comment exchanges with conservative relatives about abortion, police brutality, xenophobia, and misogyny. Our discussions always come back to church, even when we don't. Somehow, some way, they always take a turn for the theological. It is–as another friend says–the defining conversation of our lives.

      Though already here we get into debates about antecedents: is "it"–that "defining conversation"–a relationship to church as we have known it, or to white American evangelicalism as a historical, cultural, or political movement? Is "it" an understanding of God, or the pursuit of a better one? Is "it" the archetypal conversation at the Thanksgiving table, the feared if often studiously avoided fight with a conservative uncle about kneeling during the national anthem, about welfare, about transgender girls in high school sports or vaccines or the 2020 election? Is "it" the persistent question of whether it is possible–not so much theologically as socially–to be in America both Christian and anything other than Republican? Or perhaps "it" is the conflicted hope that it is

yet possible to believe in some ultimate goodness or redemption in an age of mass extinction and environmental disasters of our own making. Questions at that catastrophic scale can overwhelm us, but the interpersonal level is perhaps the most potent one: the defining conversation may be one about how to negotiate dissonance, distance, or betrayal, that conservative uncle or Boomer parent or friend who is very real to us. How can two people from the same family or community look at the world and the church and the Bible and end up so far apart?

Variation in belief, practice, and politics is neither strange nor new for Christians or members of any other religious group. Religious categories are contested and change over time, rarely stable from one generation to the next. Furthermore, people have been reconsidering their religious identification at adulthood for generations–research on church membership in particular has suggested that, at least in the twentieth century, religious practice had a "tidal quality" (Cox & Thomson-DeVeaux). Those raised in the church would drift away as young adults and then return around the time of their marriages, or when they had children to send off to Sunday school (Stolzenberg et al.). Statisticians and religious leaders have come to the shared conclusion, though, that the metaphor of tide no longer reflects the dramatic decline in religious identification, particularly among people born after 1980, and particularly among evangelical Christians (see, e.g. Pew Research Center, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America"). The causes of this decline are varied–from fertility to migration to politics–and hotly debated, but some experts and many former church-goers cite hypocrisy and moral failures as reasons for rejecting institutional Christianity. David P. Gushee, Mercer University Professor of Christian Ethics and director of the Center for Theology and Public Life, publicly estimates that "evangelicals have lost 25 million in recent years and that they are predominantly young and they are leaving primarily because they find something objectionable" about what white evangelicalism has become (Hicks). But the numbers offered by

Gushee, Gallup, Pew Research, and others give only a slim indication of the stories of millennials who were raised in white evangelicalism but find themselves, as adults, in tension with it.

Like all dramas, the projects of leaving, redefining, objecting, and resisting white evangelicalism produce conversation and controversy, and raised-evangelicals play out those tensions where most people do–online. Jia Tolentino calls the internet the "central organ of contemporary life" (11); it's increasingly displaced our material world as the primary site of our social and civic lives. Social networking sites, in particular, are where we learn what's happening, what to watch and listen to and buy and eat and wear, or what is available to us as an object of each listed verb. And for American millennials, our religious lives are, like everything else, mediated by the internet. A generation defined by growing up alongside developing digital technologies has unsurprisingly found social media to be a convenient tool for accessing alternative interpretations of Christianity, connecting with other questioners, and expressing their shifting views and religious identities, often to or for the communities they've left behind.

Some raised-evangelicals publicly identify as "exvangelical," a born-digital collective that began as a Twitter hashtag and has ballooned beyond that platform to a network of podcasts, discord servers, Substacks, Facebook groups, and TikTok accounts. It's described by religious studies professor and "Straight White American Jesus" podcast host Bradley Onishi as an "activist movement full of individuals trying to reshape the political and moral narrative surrounding evangelicalism by subverting its claims to moral and patriotic authority" ("The Rise"). The hashtag #LeaveLoud–popularized ca. 2018 by scholar-activist Jemar Tisby–collates stories of Black Christians leaving predominantly white churches; writer Chrissy Stroop started #EmptyThePews after evangelical leaders defended Trump's refusal to condemn white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. There are snarky Instagram accounts like @dirtyrottenchurchkids, a Facebook group started for formerly evangelical parents called "Raising Children

Unfundamentalist," YouTube videos, Tiktoks, and Reddit threads about leaving the church from writers who still claim Christianity, or even evangelicalism, and writers who do not. Folks with closer relationships with institutional Christianity are using these tools for critique, too, as the Twitter popularity of Beth Moore, former Southern Baptist Bible teacher and advocate for sexual abuse survivors, belies. And for every viral social media post or account, there are dozens more laypeople talking about their evolving faith online. The more prominent and organized new media voices pushing back on white evangelicalism's religious and political orthodoxy offer indications of the everyday raised-evangelicals engaging that media and engaging their communities of origin as well– people without a publishing deal or a podcast to promote who are nonetheless writing on social media about and to evangelicals.

This dissertation examines the social media writing of thirteen such people, who used Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to create and express their convictions about what it means– culturally, socially, and politically–to be a Christian in the year 2020. These writers, who all identified as having been raised in white evangelicalism and viewed some or all of their social media activity as "writing back" to their religious community of origin, came from and lived in every major region of the USA; they were urban and rural, parents, singles, gay, straight, cisgender, non-binary; they were engineers and homeschool parents, retail workers and professors and pastors. Some, but not all, were white. Some, but by no means all, still called themselves "evangelical." They all had questions and ideas about what it means to be Christian. And they all engaged in the work of witness, discernment, and engagement on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

1.2 A Map of This Introduction

This project foregrounds two moments in the history of evangelicalism: firstly, what I am calling "long 2020," a time period spanning the first impeachment of then-President Donald J.

Trump, the 2020 primary and presidential election, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a summer of protests against racism and police brutality, as well as the January 6 insurrection and inauguration. This period delimited the collection, if not the observation, of the social media writing that makes up the bulk of this project's data, both directly in the form of screenshots and indirectly as writers recalled and shared their emotions, thinking, and decision-making around those posts. The second of these two moments is less defined, and defined–for the purposes of this project–more by memory than by scholarship: each participant's evangelical past. For my interlocutors, born between 1986-1996, that period falls somewhere between about 1990 and 2015. Remembering it is felt, often, as a disintegration, and a coming of age. The writers' negotiations illuminate a shift that applies far beyond the demographic that shares their religious background: thanks to digital media, the past is more accessible than it has ever been. Social media in particular shapes both how we narrate our individual and collective histories and how we leverage them to forecast possible futures.

In this introduction, I review my research questions and relevant history, scholarship, and theory that guide this project. I begin with an orientation to the history of evangelicalism as a category of religious belonging and practice and to the wide range of Americans who claim it, attending particularly to the ways in which the uptake of media technology has shaped that identification. I then turn briefly to the emergence of white evangelicalism as a distinct category. (Participants' definitions of white evangelicalism receive more detailed treatment in Chapter 3.) My primary argument here is that evangelicalism, broadly, and white evangelicalism, in particular, are contested categories, defined by intersecting cultural, political, and economic forces that shift over time. Millennial raised-evangelicals are not the first to disrupt the category "evangelical"–but attending to the specific reasons and strategies they give for their changing relationships to the label and movement illuminates America's political and religious landscapes at a volatile moment for both.

In their social media writing directed to and overheard by friends and family within white evangelicalism, the writers in this study negotiate their religious and political distance from their home communities. Through that writing, which I call "writing back," they challenge the accepted beliefs and norms and posit new religious identities framed by evolving networks of conversation and engagement. Later in this chapter, I lay out the development of "writing back" as an analytical category with attention to the historical shifts in literacy and the impacts of digital technology and social networking on our writing and religious and political lives. I make the argument that practices like this–engagement in "political talk" and religious talk on social media–are in themselves a form of religious practice, particularly for raised-evangelicals in my study and outside it who are increasingly skeptical of, and in many cases alienated from, the more organized or institutional forms of piety that might have historically marked their devotion to God and a Christian life.

1.3 An Orientation to Evangelicalism in This Study

The growing distance between this study's raised-evangelical writers and their audiences presumes both variation and change over time; their invocation of shared values implies continuity. Both, of course, are features of evangelicalism in the United States. Theologically, there are some commonly accepted anchor points; the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) endorses the "Bebbington quadrilateral," a definition put forth in 1989 by Baylor University historian David Bebbington that ties evangelical identity to four beliefs: *biblicism*, a high regard for the Bible; *crucicentrism*, an emphasis on the atoning work of Christ on the cross; *conversionism*, the belief that all people should be converted; and *activism*, a conviction that the gospel be expressed in action. The NAE website says that many evangelicals rarely describe themselves using the label, "focusing simply on the core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith, Jesus, salvation, evangelism and discipleship." It furthermore asserts that "these distinctives and theological convictions define us

_not political, social or cultural trends," a statement that implies those trends as threats to a true evangelicalism that is somehow, impossibly, outside of its time. Historian Randall Balmer roots the American evangelical movement in the "confluence" of New England Puritanism, Scots-Irish Presbyterianism, and Continental Pietism, ignited by the revival movements known as the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening, the latter of which spans the 1790s to 1830s, more or less. Other scholars might source the event differently, but almost any story of the contested development of the category involves this theme: an exhortation that energized people from and inside multiple religious traditions to take their faith more seriously, with ensuing debates about what that means. And what it means for Christians as political actors is perhaps the question that defines the movement above all else.

Evangelicalism is now a global religious movement with variable political expression in its many national contexts. In the United States, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the question of politics has been increasingly answered by the emergence of evangelicals as a reliable and activist Republican voting bloc. Balmer and others advance the argument that it was the political organization of the 1970s by Jerry Falwell and other members of the Moral Majority that "made" evangelicals Republican. Daniel K. Williams, however, points out Falwell had little persuading to do–by the time of Ronald Reagan's 1980 election to the presidency, evangelicals had a century-old Republican history associated with shared investment in the temperance movement, banning polygamous practices, and, in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery.[1] Where shared opposition to the institution of slavery might have invigorated coalitions among some white

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[1] Williams suggests that the liberal Protestantism and conservative evangelicalism diverged in part over the support of proponents of the "social gospel" for Roosevelt's New Deal government. Anti-Catholic sentiment and regional prejudice also grounded the developing institutions of mid-twentieth-century evangelicalism, formed as an alternative to their more liberal mainline counterparts: "when the National Association of Evangelicals and its corresponding 'new evangelical' movement formed in the 1940s, all of its leaders… were fiscally conservative Republicans who viewed the urban Catholic political machines that dominated northern cities as a corrupt threat to the republic" (n.p.).

and Black evangelicals of the nineteenth century, white evangelicals largely abandoned the project of racial equality in the twentieth, defending school segregation and the rhetoric of small government. Sociologist Gerardo Martí writes convincingly that economic policy–or particular libertarian rhetoric about economic policy–also determines much of the alliance between evangelical Christians and the Republican party. He calls it an "economic orientation" (15), built by allied Christian and business leaders over the course of the twentieth century, which connects concepts of religious and economic freedom to advance the idea that the Christian economic message is one of deregulation and the sovereignty of the individual conscience. The success of the Religious Right–often better described as the Christian Right–depended on activating, rather than generating, those long traditions and cultural assumptions about money, sex, morality, and government regulation.

In the twentieth century, the movement's culture-making power dispersed and diffused through political and commercial enterprises invested in normalizing evangelical views and practices on family, gender, and government. Daniel Vaca identifies the increasing numbers of evangelicals in the United States in the twentieth century and the rise of evangelical culture-making industries as mutually reinforcing trends: evangelical book publishing, for example, not only reflected but also "helped generate evangelical demand, evangelical identities, and the very idea of a coherent evangelical population" (2). Quick to adopt new forms of media, evangelicals reached beyond the paperback to create a media empire. What had been a collection of idiosyncratic churches, denominations, and institutions soon became a robust and homogenizing audience for Christian radio, television, bookstores, films, and even theme parks. In the 1960s and 1970s, organizations like Jerry Falwell Sr.'s Moral Majority, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network reached millions of American homes. In a marriage emblematized by Billy Graham's support for Richard Nixon's 1960 and later 1968 campaign, and then by Ronald Reagan's campaign to reinstitute prayer in public schools, the evangelical media empire–and its

audience–cultivated a symbiotic relationship with conservative politicians around concerns like homosexuality, communism, private schooling, and abortion. "Family values" animated many of these concerns, as did the sanctity of the nuclear family unit: fathers at the helm, mothers at home, and children free from secular influence. White evangelicals' "colorblind gospel" identified those concerns as "Christian" in contrast to "political" issues of racism and poverty; the pronounced individualism of white evangelical culture and theology, in particular, resisted the efforts of Black evangelicals to engage unjust and oppressive systems, and "family values" offered a convenient litmus test through which to discredit large swaths of political coalitions fighting for racial justice (Curtis; Haesley & Haas). Despite widespread agreement among evangelicals on many "family values" concerns[2], the cost of participating in white-dominated institutions–including the vast majority of multi-ethnic churches, helmed by white men–has led to the creation of parallel organizations among non-white evangelicals (e.g., what is now the National Black Evangelical Organization) or their pronounced departure (e.g., the #LeaveLOUD campaign; Sharp, "Black Evangelicals").

In the twenty-first century, the political marriage of white evangelicalism and conservative politics faced a new test: the presidential candidacy of thrice-divorced former Democrat Donald Trump. During the 2016 primary election season, some evangelical leaders spoke against then-candidate Donald Trump, particularly after the release of the "Access Hollywood" tape, on which Trump brags about sexually assaulting women with impunity because of his fame. Rev. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., a key leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote in the *Washington Post* that, in

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[2] A 1998 study of Black evangelicals finds them virtually indistinguishable from white evangelicals on most measures of their views of "family values issues"; however, they were not mobilized in the political coalition of the Religious Right. Calhoun-Brown contends that variation in their attitudes toward "highly visible social groups"–including various ethnic groups–distinguish Black and white evangelicals. On some measures, Black evangelicals looked more like Black non-evangelicals than their white counterparts; suggesting–in political science terms–the mediating influence of racial identity and–in the language of this study–a racial solidarity that expanded their imagined community (see Chapter 1; Thomas, Wong).

light of this revelation, "Trump's horrifying statements, heard in his own proud voice, revealed an objectification of women and a sexual predation that must make continued support for Trump impossible for any evangelical leader."[3] And yet, famously, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election, citing abortion and supreme court nominees, which are related concerns–but also national security, the economy, and immigration (Renaud). His past was his past, and ongoing moral shortcomings were justified as those of a "baby Christian" after his campaign trail conversion was reported by James Dobson of Focus on the Family (Miller, "Is Donald Trump Now"). In the 2020 election, Christian institutions and communities again debated Trump's fitness as a candidate, yet many influential evangelical leaders again fell in line: despite his earlier criticism of the candidate, Mohler said publicly that he planned to vote for then-President Donald Trump in 2020, and even when condemning the subsequent January 6 riots at the Capitol– which were fed by conspiracy theories and violent rhetoric circulating on social media, and marked by Christian symbols including flags and crosses (Green)–said that he did not regret his vote (Gjelten).

The shifting justifications evangelicals have offered for supporting Trump reveal the extent to which political and religious identities have merged both on the Christian right and in the national imagination. The symbiotic relationship of the Graham-Nixon era has produced an exchange of ideals, to the extent that followers of Jesus, who preached that "truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me," including showing hospitality to strangers (Matthew 25:40, NRSV), overwhelmingly support immigration crackdowns

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[3] In June 2016, Religion News Service compiled a list of high-profile conservative Christian theologians, seminary professors, church leaders, and public intellectuals who had critiqued Trump following the leak and updated it throughout the fall. The list included Russell Moore, David French, author Max Lucado, and even conservative Twitter firebrand Owen Strachan, outlining their denouncements in language that feels, half a decade later, improbably strong coming from such conservative circles: Alan Noble, editor of the website *Christ and Pop Culture*, called him "a deceptive, infantile, racist demagogue with no political principles aside from his own self-interest," citing in particular Trump's 2015 comments that he doesn't ask for God's forgiveness (Miller, "14 Conservative Christians").

and limits to refugee resettlement: "by more than two-to-one (68% to 25%), white evangelical Protestants say the U.S. does not have a responsibility to accept refugees" (Hartig). Despite predictions about backlash, a 2021 Pew Research Center report indicated that during the Trump presidency, the number of White Americans identifying as evangelical grew (Smith), a phenomenon political scientist Ryan P. Burge has explained as a result of that very synonymity. These newest evangelicals seem to imagine it less as a descriptor of the type of church they attend–if they go at all, and fewer and fewer do–and more as a signal of their allegiance to an increasingly volatile form of reactionary politics. A wider group of non-Protestants–Catholics, Latter-Day Saints, Orthodox Christians, and even Hindus and Muslims–have also claimed the term ("Are We All"). Burge argued in 2021 that "many Americans are coming to the understanding that to be very religiously engaged and very politically conservative means that they are evangelical, even if they don't believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ" ("Why 'Evangelical' Is Becoming").

For raised-evangelicals like the ones in my study, the evangelical communities of their youth–the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s–may look in retrospect quite different from the evangelicalism of today. But for Christians still claiming the label, religious engagement is circumscribed by political affiliation; Burge's own analysis also suggests that it's now easier to be a non-church-attending conservative evangelical than an active member, but a more liberal one. Christians like those in this study often find that shifts in their political beliefs or voting patterns inevitably also challenge their religious identification, raising sociological questions with deeply personal stakes: What does it mean to be evangelical in this decade? If the term increasingly implies "white" and "Republican," can it be redefined? Should they try? Or must they–can they–configure new religious identities that reach beyond their traditions of origin?

1.3.1 Who Decides How to Define Evangelical?

As the historical review above demonstrates, religious categories have always been unstable, and white evangelicalism is in this historical moment undergoing significant shifts. Those changes are furthermore causally entangled with emerging media platforms and technological change. The intensifying political charge of the term "evangelical" in the United States has ignited methodological debates among the researchers who study it as a category or a population; the wide variation among theological, political, and cultural understandings of the term present sampling challenges with real stakes. The NAE, invested in advancing theological over political definitions, provides explicit recommendations for how to define evangelicals in research; it forwards four statements to which respondents must agree in order to be considered evangelical, which clearly mirror Bebbington's authoritative definition:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.

- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.

- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.

- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

In practice, however, using theological definitions runs quickly into problems. Research indicates significant gaps between term and definition that work in different directions for different demographics. Some survey respondents, particularly white and conservative Christians, don't affirm the statements but do identify as evangelical; others, particularly Black Christians, affirm those four statements yet don't self-identify–both indications that the definition and term are not understood

by either group to be equivalent.[4] The categorization of denominations is also not much help here, a theme I'll explore with regard to my survey respondents in Chapter 3. The "Evangelical" Lutheran Church in America is considered a mainline denomination; Missouri Synod Lutherans count as evangelical (Pew Research Center, "Appendix B"). The Public Religion Research Institute tries to address the racialization of evangelicalism by breaking Protestant denominational affiliations into three categories: white evangelical Protestant, white mainline Protestant, and historically Black Protestant, with "other Christian" to collect members of smaller groups; they contend that despite the overlaps of beliefs affirmed by historically Black congregations and Bebbington quadrilateral evangelicals, Christians in these groups have distinct views on the application of faith to political and cultural issues (Smietana, "Are You").

In polls, researchers often use a double-barreled question to identify evangelical Christians: Gallup has, since 1986, used the item "Would you describe yourself as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian?" and other leading polling organizations, like the Pew Research Center, have picked it up. However, this sentence construction causes a good deal of confusion for both survey respondents and analysts. For one thing, "interpretations of and responses to the double-barreled versus single-barreled questions differ for White and African-American survey takers," writes political scientist Michele F. Margolis, and the profiles of single-barreled questions differ significantly from the racial demographics of "yes" respondents to "'born again' or evangelical." For another, the evolution of religious language–particularly with respect to these two terms–presents difficulties for pollsters seeking to identify evangelical Christians; questions developed in the 1970s and 1980s reflect a political, cultural, and religious landscape that's now long past (Margolis). Recent scholarship

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[4] A 2018 study by Lifeway Research, a Nashville-based Christian research firm, reveals this discrepancy: when they used the quadrilateral to categorize respondents as evangelical, 23% of evangelicals were Black. When they asked respondents to self-identify, that percentage dropped to 14% (Smietana, "Are You").

overwhelmingly suggests that respondents' desire to signal their political identity guides their decisions about using the evangelical label: "Democrats (Republicans), even those who are quite devout (not very religious), may eschew (adopt) the evangelical identity on account of their political outlooks," raising "the possibility" that the charged political and religious environment of the 2020s "might affect survey responses." Qualitative data from my study and others heartily underscore Margolis's concern about the usefulness of theological constructs–even the language of "born again"–in grouping Christians under the evangelical label.

Trump-era historical studies of white American evangelicalism in particular have fallen into two broad camps in their mapping of the movement. First, there are those who believe that something good has been corrupted, whether that good be a theological ideal–see the work of Murphy and Ringer, below–or an earnest community of believers manipulated or led astray by powerful forces beyond their ken. The subtitle of Kristin Kobes Du Mez's New York Times bestseller *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* is one example. It leaves open the possibility of a less corrupted Christian faith, as do work by other scholars who still identify as Protestant: Beth Allison Barr's *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* and Jemar Tisby's *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism.* Books in this vein often draw distinctions between laypeople and leaders, arguing that responsibility for the sins of the movement belongs primarily to those in power, and they may end with a call for the church to take action for change. The second camp argues that the movement has been rotten all along; in *White Evangelical Racism,* her history of American evangelicalism from the nineteenth century to today, Anthea Butler critiques the sanitized, exclusively theological and historical definitions of famed white male scholars of evangelicalism like Mark Noll, David Bebbington, and George Marsden, and once again draws attention to the racial and promotional politics of the movement:

evangelicals are, however, concerned with their political alliance with the Republican party

and with maintaining the cultural and racial whiteness that they have transmitted to the

public. This is the working definition of American evangelicalism. American print and

television media have embraced and promoted this definition, and the American public has

accepted it. (4).

She continues by stating that–unless otherwise specified–in her book and in the American

consciousness, "evangelical" means "white." Jacob Alan Cook makes a similar claim in his analysis

of "worldview theory" in evangelical circles, contending that in fact widespread efforts to instill a

"Christian worldview" in young people and new converts served to inculcate in those new

evangelicals particular ways of understanding society and human difference, among them Christian

nationalism, free enterprise, and individual liberty–a white politics advanced as biblical truth.

1.3.2 Not All Evangelicals

Butler points to the commonly accepted connotations of the term evangelical and Cook to

the hierarchies its belief system upholds, both frames that name the power centers of evangelicalism

in the United States. Scholars and commentators continue to debate the right configurations of

emphasis and accuracy, negotiating the often competing demands to identify and critique those

power centers while acknowledging meaningful variation among those who claim the evangelical

label. It is true, for example, that not all evangelicals in the United States are or were Republican.

During the rise of the Religious Right, detailed above, the evangelical left and other progressive

Christian institutions kept up a voice of dissent against the idea that God expected all believers to

vote straight-ticket Republican–or at least against the idea that sex, gender, and communism were

God's preeminent political concerns. Also emerging in the 1970s, organizations like Jim Wallis'

Sojourners magazine, Evangelicals for Social Action–now "Christians for Social Action" as of 2020–

and the Association for Public Justice advanced alternative ideas of Christian political engagement, focusing on issues like poverty, healthcare access, support for refugees, and environmental concerns. In the 2000s, capital punishment abolition activist and author Shane Claiborne started the "Red Letter Christians" movement with pastor, sociologist, and anti-poverty activist Tony Campolo. Their position within evangelicalism remained out of the mainstream–a 2012 history of the movement is punningly titled *Moral Minority* (Swartz)–but it did present an alternative path and offered institutional networks for evangelicals uncomfortable with the political and cultural activity of the Christian Right. As the name change of Christians for Social Action indicates, these figures and their devotees may not claim the category evangelical in the present; yet despite–or perhaps because of– that distancing, they still have some purchase among people in my study population. Claiborne, in particular, came up multiple times in my social media observations as participants shared quotes, statements, or Red Letter Christians resources.

It is also true that not all evangelicals are white, and evangelicalism looks different depending on the racial background of both the individual and their larger community. Even as "evangelical" is increasingly understood as a shorthand for "white Republican"–or a synonym for "Trump supporter" (more on this in Chapter 3), it remains true that racial backgrounds and histories, including histories of migration, mediate each person's political imaginary, in particular who it is the believer imagines to be part of their religious and national community and how they enact their relationships to those members in their political activity. Sociologist Lydia Bean contends that while white evangelical Canadians tend to view social programs as "an expression of national solidarity," their American counterparts see them as "expressions of 'grace' toward morally unworthy people" (Bean, qtd. In Wong 40). To illuminate the ideological variation across evangelicalism by race and ethnicity, sociologist Janelle Wong extends Bean's work to argue that nonwhite evangelicals in the U.S. operate more like white evangelical Canadians–when defining the "we" or "us" v. them,

nonwhite evangelicals also imagine a more expansive "national community" that extends "beyond Christian identity to include coethnics and others who have faced systematic discrimination by the state" (41). The relevance of community-making, and boundary-making, to variation by race and ethnicity within evangelicalism is affirmed by scholarship on Black evangelicals in the United States: Todne Thomas's work on Black evangelical articulates a project of "kincraft," through which Black evangelicals forge intimate relationships that extend the language of family to fellow congregants and believers, a microcosmic view of the kind of extrapolated loyalties Wong and Bean locate in non-white and non-American evangelicals. Like Wong, Thomas traces the practice to the diasporic identities for Afro-Caribbean parishioners and experiences of migration within and beyond the borders of the United States, a suggestion that for nonwhite evangelicals, living memories of displacement may mediate national and religious identity in multifaceted ways.

Those variations expand the models available to other American Christians of all racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds, offering alternate political expressions of the Christian faith and ways to understand religious identity and practice beyond the narrow white-evangelical-Republican frame. As this dissertation's conclusion will reiterate, the writers in this study drew on non-white, non-evangelical, and non-Republican ideas and figures to resource their emerging religious identities, a practice with ecumenical precedent. Historians and sociologists note that even rhetorical resources so insidious as the tenets of Christian nationalism have been put to use by progressive Christians agitating for the rights of the oppressed–the U.S. Civil Rights Movement is perhaps so common an example that it has become a cliché–and these traditions, too, provide important precedent which the raised-evangelicals in this study have drawn upon.

Some scholars have suggested that the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of evangelicalism–and of America–might bolster more politically progressive forms of Christian faith. Wong, however, cautions against viewing demographic change as determinative; her scholarship

17

explores structural factors that limit the influence of "racially diverse evangelicals" on the "dominant white evangelical agenda," including political participation rates and moderate political positions as well as the understood boundaries of Asian American and Latinx racial communities (7). The infrastructure behind that dominant agenda extends a powerful assimilative force, while the waning influence of the evangelical left–as well as its ambivalence about the evangelical label–make claims to a different imagined evangelicalism harder to sustain. The 2016 election revealed the limited influence of that network's institutions and their heroes, figures who had made it seem possible to be a different kind of evangelical.[5]

1.3.3 Imagined Evangelicalisms

The methodological challenges named by survey researchers and the trends named by historians have led many scholars to the same conclusion: from a twenty-first century vantage point, theological distinctives like the Bebbington Quadrilateral are not very useful in defining what evangelicalism has come to mean. The NAE may lament the ways cultural associations with Fox News viewership and Republican politics have muddied the waters and elided the racial and ethnic diversity within American evangelical networks; religious historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez, however, avers that there is no purely theological evangelicalism–those seeking to define it will find it more useful to think "in terms of the degree to which individuals participate in this evangelical culture of consumption" rather than trying to distinguish real and supposed evangelicals on the basis of theological conviction (*Jesus and John Wayne* 8). Engagement with the evangelical media culture

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[5] Media coverage of former evangelicals often focuses on the difficulty of reconciling membership in a faith community that professes a particular political stance with one's own opposition to that stance. A 2021 *Vice* piece on leaving evangelicalism includes multiple such stories, including Blake Chastain of the "Exvangelical" podcast, whose departure from the subculture began with "white evangelicals' outsized support for the invasion of Iraq, something he saw as at odds with the person of Jesus" (Brobst). Evangelical support for Donald Trump and his policies is often cited as the cause of more recent fractures.

establishes bonds that form the basis of "a shared cultural identity"–an identity that has cultural and political power. And that evangelical media culture might have its centers of power, but it knows no denominational, or geographic, boundaries.

To understand that cultural identity and its anchors, as well as their political and racial implications, I follow Du Mez, who follows Benedict Anderson's work on the imagined community as essential to the rise of the nation-state. Anderson describes nations as *imagined* and *communities* because even in a small group, not all members can know one another, but nonetheless understand themselves as sharing membership–a sense of collective identity which, he argues, was produced by the "mass ceremony" of newspaper reading in the context of the early twentieth century. Many scholars since have drawn on contention that the circulation of ideas and texts creates a sense of solidarity among the public which consumes them. They extend Anderson's historical argument to make sense of digital circulation, as well, and to track the formation of social groups and movements amidst the rapid technological advancements that have changed circulation and consumption of information and ideas from the emergence of printing press capitalism–Anderson's original subject– to Web 2.0 and networked technologies (e.g., Cowan; Sultana et al.). The "mass ceremony" of social media engagement also has readily apparent influence on the memberships users ascribe to themselves.

Du Mez contends that Anderson's framework enables scholars of evangelicalism to better engage questions of power: whose imaginings of evangelicalism are taken as normative, and have the capacity–through the extensive media empire she describes–to "shape other people's imaginings"? ("There Are No"). Framing evangelicalism in exclusive theological, racial, or political terms limits our ability to engage its variation and the fervent internal struggles over what it should mean; thinking in terms of the imagined communities created by engagement with print and digital culture enables scholars to recognize the legitimacy of more politically progressive subcultures within the

evangelical world and to also account for the ways in which a Trumpist evangelicalism has

overwhelmed those imaginings in recent years. Not all evangelicals are Republican, and not all

evangelicals are white, but the public face of evangelicalism in America is decidedly both. As that

conflation gains momentum, observers have turned to new terms to name the norms and power

structures of the mainstream movement. The most relevant of these is *white* evangelicalism.

1.3.4 The Terms of This Study

The noun phrase "white evangelicalism" is relatively new to mainstream public discourse but

has achieved widespread use very quickly—when run through the Google NGram, a tool which plots

the frequency of words or phrases across the Google Books dataset from 1800-2019, the line starts

to curve dramatically upward at the year 2000 and shows a nearly vertical line after about 2013. By

appending the adjective "white" to "evangelicalism," the user seeks to delimit the kind of Christian

belief and culture they are speaking about, and furthermore that user seeks to invoke, more than

describe, a sinister power network. The preeminent feature of that network is that racism which

Anthea Butler describes as "a feature, not a bug, of American evangelicalism" in a book that

specifically addresses the vilification of Muslims, Latinos, and African Americans (2). A related

feature is its imbrication with the Republican party and reactionary influence in American politics.

However, the invocation of "white evangelicalism" also functions similarly to invocations of "white

feminism," a term that likewise achieved widespread popularity in the 2010s. The term "white

feminism" has a specific rhetorical purpose—it "allows us to identify [marginalization], and root it out

and combat it when it occurs," in the words of feminist blogger Cate Young (qtd. in Zeilinger). In

present usage, white evangelicalism—like white feminism—seems to have twin and seemingly

contradictory connotations: that adherents are both naïve and ruthless about power. They may be

naïve insofar as they have not considered or refuse to acknowledge the larger structures and systems

that inform interpersonal incidents of racism, classism, ableism, queerphobia, and so forth; they may

be ruthless insofar as they believe those systems should be exploited for their own or their

community's gain, regardless of impacts on others.

In this study, I use the terminology of "white evangelicalism" for several reasons. The first,

and least important, is convenience: as argued above, "white evangelicalism" has emerged as an

effective shorthand for making explicit the norms embedded in mainstream evangelicalism in the

United States. It succinctly invokes the reality that evangelical Protestants in America are

overwhelmingly white while also reminding the reader that these same white Christians consistently

deny the existence of structural racism and discrimination against minority groups (see, e.g., Cox et

al.). As Butler and Cook suggest, while people of color are connected to and sometimes very active

in evangelical churches, schools, and other institutions, the most prominent and politically powerful

evangelical institutions in the United States are overwhelmingly white in membership and leadership,

and the vision of evangelicalism they put forward in the public sphere reflects that identification.

The increasingly potent associations between white evangelicalism and white nationalism are only

one of many indications of the hostility and violence white evangelicalism often enacts on people of

color.[6] Secondly, the historical reach of white evangelicalism–tied to evangelicalism as a broader

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[6] Not all agree that white evangelicalism names the right problem–Perry and Whitehead make the case that the cultural framework of Christian nationalism is, statistically speaking, a more significant driver of conservative social attitudes and behaviors than identifying as an evangelical, regardless of racial identity. Particularly in the months since the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol, discussion of Christian nationalism and white Christian nationalism in particular has intensified. In many places, these terms have replaced white evangelicalism as the descriptor for a set of events and actors often also described as theocratic or Christofascist. The evolution and interchangeable usage of these terms can often muddy important distinctions between them. Perry and Whitehead, researchers who developed the "Christian nationalism scale" that tracks survey respondents' agreement with a six-item measure, argue that definitional confusion challenges efforts to categorize and identify anti-democratic ideologies. They make the case that the cultural framework

movement, and also retrospectively naming its racial politics–enables me to probe the development, over time, of participants' political awareness and the development of political and cultural attitudes and events relevant to their experience of evangelicalism; furthermore, it enables me to foreground writers' childhood and more contemporary religious identifications in my study of political talk.

Finally, it foregrounds in my study the problem of moral authority. As Chapter 3 will examine, the language of white evangelicalism is rarely, if ever, used in a positive sense, and seems to be invoked most frequently by the movement's detractors–that is, someone using this term is almost certainly using it, at least in part, as a moral judgment, and one that distances that speaker from the movement. In checking "yes" on a survey item asking if they were raised in white evangelicalism, my study participants are already implicitly identifying themselves as someone with a fraught or oppositional relationship to that religious tradition. However, I caution here that I am not, in this dissertation, primarily interested in delineating the sins of white evangelicalism or indeed arguing for or against its redemption. There are many scholars who have chronicled the racist ideologies and actions of white Christians in America and abroad; there are many scholars and writers who have sought to understand and theorize whiteness, racism, and the intersection of racial and religious identity, more still who have and do attempt to hammer out the many ethical questions surrounding those concerns. I am not attempting to do any of those things. The whiteness of white evangelicalism figures in this study primarily as a problem my participants negotiate in their writing

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of Christian nationalism is, statistically speaking, a more significant driver of conservative social attitudes and behaviors than identifying as an evangelical, regardless of racial identity. They also point out several metrics by which frequency of religious practice (e.g., attending church, praying, reading scriptures) is positively linked to more generous attitudes, including the recognition of racial discrimination in policing and disagreeing that people should be made to respect American traditions. But there is no denying the overlap–roughly half of evangelicals "by some definitions" embrace Christian nationalism to some degree, and a higher percentage than in any of the other religious identity categories captured in their graphs–and that overlap is certainly relevant in a study whose period of focus includes the insurrection. It may be that identification with Christian nationalism is reshaping not only what white evangelicalism has come to mean, but who believers consider co-religionists, or people who share their most important beliefs. The Christian nationalist white evangelical might find more in common with similarly conservative Catholics than with fellow evangelicals who push back on their ideals. In Chapter 3, I discuss trends that indicate this reorganization is already at play; it already shapes how my participants view white evangelicalism, and subsequently how they choose to affiliate.

as they direct their persuasive efforts toward a historically powerful group that often understands itself as aggrieved. As a scholar of rhetoric, writing, and social media, I focus this study on how my participants use language to identify themselves and their interlocutors, how they explain their own decision-making, and the rhetorical strategies they employ in an attempt to advance alternatives to the cultural and political positions of mainstream white evangelicalism in the United States. In doing so, I illuminate how those raised in white evangelicalism themselves understand it, and what resources they use to tell compelling stories–for themselves and for white evangelical audiences–about the intersections of politics and religious faith.

I offer here a few additional caveats about the use of terms in this dissertation. As I mentioned above, I use the terminology of "white evangelicalism" for particular reasons. I also designed the study to feature writers *raised in white evangelicalism,* rather than *writers raised as white evangelicals* in order to include in the study population writers of any race and ethnicity who had grown up in the loose network of churches, institutions, and media channels that comprises white evangelicalism (more on that definition in Chapter 3). Limiting my research to writers who identify as both white and evangelical would have excluded writers of color, including multiracial writers or those who grew up in white families, from the study pool, a loss for any project seeking to understand how millennial raised-evangelicals navigate and write about their tradition of origin. Because my study is invested in the political purchase of evangelicalism as a term and a movement, I use participants' self-identification with regard to their communities of origin (more on that in Chapter 2), and both acknowledge and explore in my study the overlaps and unevenness of their experiences of evangelicalism. The varying models, traditions, and rhetorical resources outlined above, and the unevenness in the individual experiences this dissertation will go on to delineate, speak to the bigger question of this dissertation: how do raised-evangelicals use social media writing to reconfigure their religious identities?

And finally: in order to avoid conflating white evangelicals with all evangelicals, a common problem in religious discourse in the United States, I do speak sometimes of evangelicalism without the adjective "white." When I refer to white evangelicalism in this dissertation, I mean to imply the specific network of American evangelical churches, institutions, and media that hold white racial identities as a normative standard. When I use the noun phrase "white evangelical(s)," I am using white as a descriptor of racial identity for particular evangelical people under discussion or as a demographic. For the sake of brevity, I will largely leave off the descriptor "American," having established that parameter here. Where this is confusing–it often is–I do my best to clarify my meaning in the text. And now, having established the religious context of this study, I turn to a discussion of social media writing and to plotting the intersections of their histories.

1.4 (Religious) People Writing Online

Evangelicalism was happening on the internet even before the COVID-19 lockdowns moved many religious services online, because everything was happening on the internet. Travis Warren Cooper argues that paradigms of media sincerity and media promiscuity, which include values around immediacy, directness, and wide distribution, have long made evangelicals early adopters of new technologies from print to radio to televangelism to blogs to Instagram. The fields of religion and religious rhetorics have evolved along with practitioners to study digital religion, just as writing studies has expanded in response to the ubiquitous writing now conducted by smartphone and laptop computer users everywhere that humans go. Stephanie A. Martin investigated the online outreach of evangelical megachurches, and Bethany Mannon reviewed the work of "Christian famous" blogger-memoirists like Jen Hatmaker and Sarah Bessey. Anthropological studies of millennial Christians on the political fringes of evangelicalism make use of how the social media activity of megachurch pastors and their wives, for example, shape expectations around femininity

(Gaddini), and how social networking has facilitated connection between pro-LGBTQ+ inclusion advocates in disparate evangelical communities (Burrow-Branine). Research on institutions, celebrities, and leaders is on the whole much more available than scholarship on laypeople; in particular, the "everyday" Christians who use the internet to construct and perform religious identities that trouble the categories historically used by surveyors and statisticians.

This focus on higher-profile writers and rhetors belies a historical bias–for much of the history of writing studies as a contemporary discipline, the writing available for scholarly analysis has been limited to texts published in periodicals or books; quotidian writing was preserved only if its author had achieved sufficient economic, cultural, or political prominence to merit some kind of archive. We are now, however, in a different era[7]: "mass writing," in the words of literacy scholar Deborah Brandt. Millions of Americans now spend much of their day producing the emails, memos, computer code, agendas, meeting minutes, web copy, reports, instant messages, and–for the purposes of this study, most significantly–social media posts that make up so much of twenty-first century work and life. Brandt attributes the ascendancy of writing to economic forces–writing has become a product, as well as a means of production–but also to technological change, including digital media and "many-to-many" forms of inexpensive communication. The personal computer, in particular, figures largely in the shift Brandt names toward mass writing, and the subsequent introduction and ubiquity of smartphones and social networking sites only intensifies the trajectory she describes. In an era of mass writing, "more and more people read at the screen, from the posture of a writer, with hands on the keyboard" (57).

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[7] Religious institutions, famously Protestant churches in particular, served as sponsors of literacy toward mass reading, foregrounding associations between literacy and morality as well as literacy and religiosity. "Harder to teach, messy to learn, not as suitable a vehicle for religious or social control, especially dangerous in the hands of the oppressed," in Brandt's words (57), writing has historically been taught after reading if at all (Monaghan).

In fact, almost any study of contemporary writing practices–or contemporary religion–is by necessity also a study of digital activity, particularly for American millennials. Rare is the experience of religious practice or life that does not involve internet-mediated activities like coordinating a carpool to a community event over an iMessage group chat, using a Google doc sign-up for volunteers to read in a worship service, commenting on or sharing the Instagram post of the writer whose book is the theme for that season's small group, or emailing a relevant article or newsletter to a friend. A 2014 study of college-age writers was titled "ubiquitous writing" in reference to the permeation of writing into nearly every moment of students' lives, from texting to email to lecture notes (Pigg et al.). Smartphone use has only accelerated since that article was published, meaning that many Americans are never without the necessary technology for composing texts of all kinds; we don't need a personal computer or a Wi-Fi connection to produce tweets, reddit posts, notes, infographics, videos, and image-texts. In fact, many kinds of writing available to social media users do not require them to tap out any additional words on the smartphone or laptop keyboard: writing, in the paradigm I use in this study, involves not only the long posts and captions that study participants type out, but also the retweeting, sharing, and liking or favoriting they do on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Writing and religion intermingle on their newsfeeds and accounts, from memes about Christian Contemporary Music to quotes from famous theologians to comments, commentary, and replies directed at today's high-profile Christian leaders.

1.4.1 Social Media Presents a Tricky Rhetorical Situation

The intermingling of politics and religiosity, so pronounced for white American evangelicals, makes this assertion almost self-evident: wherever people are talking about religion, they are also talking about politics. And they are doing both of those things online. Political talk is commonly cast as a democratic good, if a fraught one–Kim and Kim have called it a "fundamental underpinning of

deliberative democracy" (51). Through informal discussions, citizens work through what they've seen, read, or heard from media sources, collect information and new ways of understanding, and explore their own thinking. Social networking sites, however, also introduce new forms of ambiguity into discussions that already risked controversy, discomfort, or disruption in "otherwise amiable social relationship[s]." In the era of social media, one in which sites like Twitter have been aspirationally designated the "public square" of unencumbered speech, everyday political conversation is increasingly seen as "a form of political participation in and of itself" (Thorson). That raises the stakes for the kind of writing undertaken by the social media users in this study. As Gold et al. write: "online writing makes us anxious" (n.p.). Of course it does. Every update to a platform's algorithm places writers under conditions we've never had to negotiate before.

In particular, we're anxious because social media reconfigures our relationships with our interlocutors. Political talk is taking unusual shapes in response to the social networking sites where we attempt to do it and their affordances, or the range of activities the platform facilitates. danah boyd, a Microsoft researcher, describes those sites as "networked publics" that are simultaneously a space and a group of people. While those websites look quite different than they did in 2010, when boyd published this work, the features she describes as essential to the architecture of the sites remain salient: profiles, friends lists, public commenting tools, and stream-based updates. Her discussion of the first item in this list is most salient to my project: profile generation "is an explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment," but because conversations happen or appear on a writer's profile, a timeline that reflects their engagement with the site, they "do not have complete control over their self-representation" (43). Exchanges or mentions on the site also characterize the writers involved. The writers also do and do not have control over who views, or can view, their activity. boyd describes three dynamics that shape networked publics: *invisible audiences*, not necessarily visible or co-present to the writing, *collapsed contexts*, bringing together

otherwise distinct social contexts and confusing writers who occupy different roles in each, and *the blurring of public and private*, changing social norms around the flow of information and how to negotiate privacy. In Thorson's Facebook-focused study, for example, users who posted a significant amount of news and political content on their social media accounts reported that their activity was intended to "inform or mobilize" their friends, yet they also struggled to negotiate "wild card commenters" and the uncertainty of not knowing who sees their post or how. They often retreated into humor to "neutralize" their political commentary (207-211).

Writers like those in my study, who are negotiating digital writing in a networked public, must contend with shifting negotiations of privacy, unexpected audiences, and the possibility of immediate and persistent reader responses. Though composition studies tends to position "audience" as an unequivocal good, Gold et al. write, "context collapse"–the pithier term evolved from boyd's early description of "collapsed contexts," cited above–belies the homogenous imagined audience many social media writers address (Litt & Hargittai). Instead, "people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses" (boyd, *It's Complicated* 31). In his 2020 monograph *Update Culture and the Afterlife of Digital Writing*, Gallagher makes the case that social media platforms that place the responses of the audience next to the writer's original text have rearranged relationships between digital reading and writing and also between writers and their audiences. Unlike writing in print, where a text is sent to readers in static form, "digital writers make a variety of decisions and engage in a remarkable range of activities after they initially complete a digital text" (*Update Culture* 4).

The new relationships to text and audience required in Gallagher's "update culture" are particularly intense for writers posting, commenting, or otherwise engaging online about controversial topics like religion and politics. The "remarkable range of activities" writers engage in

after publishing may reflect attempts to exert control over an online environment we struggle to understand. Social media writers edit their texts to manage audience reception, spend time drafting, revising, or otherwise "self-censoring" posts on Facebook (Das & Kramer), agonize over how to manage comments, or disengage from social media for long periods. These post-publication activities may operate as strategies to manage audience response and accomplish political goals, and as strategies to protect or manage one's own well-being in the face of emotionally charged exchanges. As social media has displaced other infrastructures for accessing and distributing information, a problem only intensified by the COVID-era shift to virtual for everything from church to pub trivia, update culture feels both more tenuous and less optional. Where else would you go, if you had something important to say?

1.4.2 Religious Practice Is Not Just (Church) Attendance

I have argued above that religious practice is now, like writing, mediated by the internet in a multitude of quotidian ways, and also that the behavioral shifts Gallagher names and the technological and economic developments addressed by Brandt and boyd have changed the relationship writers have with their texts and with their audiences: for social media writers posting and participating in discussions about issues of conviction, the demands of "update culture" intensify their engagement. I build on these premises to make the case that political and religious talk on social media can be fruitfully understood as a religious practice. While emotions–like anxiety or passion–are part of both political talk and religious practice, these are not my primary grounds. Instead, I build on scholarship that expands the category of activities and behaviors known as religious practice and contend that writing done to establish a particular relationship to one's religious community of origin, for example, or to express or distance oneself from a theological

29

tenet or a political position considered an expression of religious belief–is a religious activity that both constructs and informs religious identity.

A key precedent in the religious studies literature comes from the work of Rachel Gross, who responds to those who "bemoan the supposed decrease" in American Jewish religious practice by making the case that activities like visiting historic sites, conducting genealogical research, preparing, eating, and purchasing traditional foods, and buying children's books and toys are all, in fact, activities "properly understood as religious." Gross resists a definition of religious practice that prioritizes regular attendance at religious services as a marker of faith. Instead, she identifies activities that reaffirm religious identity in the everyday and reveal new contours of the ways American Jews are "finding and making meaning" in Judaism today (4).[8] This assertion reframes the study of contemporary religious practice and reveals its stakes: if researchers rely on old categories to measure engagement (for Gross, measures like synagogue attendance; in the Christian tradition, church attendance, or membership, etc.), they–we–will miss what people are actually doing. At the time of our interviews, several of my study participants were not active church-goers. Several had left churches or had a rupture within their church community because of tensions about COVID-19 mitigation measures or church leaders' silence about summer 2020 protests against police brutality

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[8] For many of its members, American Judaism involves an ethnic and genealogical legacy that has no clean parallels in American evangelicalism, but I rely here on Gross's scholarship not only for its intervention in the field's understanding of twenty-first century religion but also for the evocation of a religious identity that both is, and is not, a matter of personal choice. Even in a religious tradition famously associated with an experience of conversion or being born again, family and personal ties complicate how children of that community understand themselves: in the words of one survey respondent, "I identify as evangelical because it's my tradition of origin." The identifier "exvangelical," popularized originally as a Twitter hashtag for former evangelicals who now reject evangelicalism, is defined by its originator as "an easily accessible shorthand to acknowledge our past experience," a nod "to our *heritage* and how it has shaped us" (Chastain; emphasis mine). Some of those exvangelicals are now progressive Christians, others atheists or converts to a different religion altogether. Gross also acknowledges the complications of drawing a line between the religious and non-religious, or between two religious categories–while many identify religion as a "private set of beliefs and practices," around "worship of a deity," for many American Jews, belief in the existence of God "may not be of primary importance to [their] religious identity and practice" (5). This detail again has no easy parallel for participants in my study, though it may for those who claim the "exvangelical" label more robustly; I include it here to underscore the inadequacy of definitions that link religious identity to continuous intellectual assent to specific beliefs; in practice, both religious identity and expression are more variable and varied.

and anti-Black racism. Many who were active in their churches were not attending services in person; a good portion of church-sponsored organized activities like small groups and Bible studies were on indefinite hiatus for public health reasons. But they were all writing online–posting and sharing critiques of the church, resources and articles about how other Christians had or should respond to those issues, photos of books they were reading about the Bible or spiritual practices, stories of their own experiences and what they had learned. These are not the behaviors of people who do not care about Christianity, about church, or about "the Church" with a capital C.

This argument also emerges, for me, from interviews with my participants. When I asked participants why they chose to "write back," or on what issues, they often spoke about representing their own identities, experiences, and beliefs. They also often spoke about representing a viewpoint they didn't yet see in their feeds: "to be a balancing voice," in Christy's words, disrupt the perception of consensus, or speak up because they might be the only person to contribute that perspective in a given reader's feed. Jordan spoke of their return to Facebook after a long hiatus in these terms, recounting their realization that "for a lot of people I might be one of the only people they've ever heard of who identifies as non-binary," and they wanted to educate their Facebook friends about gender identity (I spend more time with these comments in Chapter 4). This phrasing, and several other interview conversations, called to mind the evangelical adage that "you may be the only Bible some people ever read," or "I may be the only Jesus someone ever sees."[9] These activities participate in a long rhetorical tradition of witnessing and testimony within American Protestantism, but also the much wider human tradition of considering how religious beliefs should shape human behavior and how adherents should represent their community, their tradition, and their god. And as much as

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[9] I had difficulty tracing the origins of this (both familiar and malleable) quotation via search engine, but did get a wide range of hits, including a 2007 Kirk Franklin gospel song: "if we say we love Jesus, but they can't see our Jesus / Tell me what's the use if they can't see Jesus in you and me."

their writing was a tool for communicating with their political counterparts within white evangelicalism, it also generated connections with the like-minded, whose positive responses–in comments or in private messages, or in in-person conversations–affirmed for the writer that they weren't alone in their beliefs.

From Kenneth Burke, arguing that language is symbolic action, to John Duffy, who contends that writing "initiates a relationship" that acts on the addressed other (11), rhetoricians broadly agree that language wields power. In this moment of outrage and inflammatory political rhetoric, Duffy says, greater attention ought to be paid to the necessary and inevitable questions of ethics that its use must raise, particularly in argumentation: "the very act of sitting down to write"– figuratively speaking, since one can retweet a post from almost any physical position–

> places before the writer… those questions that speak to the kinds of people we choose to
> be, the kinds of relationships we seek to establish with others, and the kinds of communities
> in which we wish to live. Have I been truthful in making these claims? Have I been fair-
> minded in considering views that oppose my own? Shall I use this inflammatory
> metaphor…? (11).

Duffy links the ethical questions we navigate in any piece of writing that is for others–which is nearly every piece of writing we do–to fundamental questions of truth and virtue that have long animated philosophy, and about which religions the world over have had a good deal to say. Perhaps because of that resonance, the writers in this study are deeply attuned to the way their writing might impact others, profoundly invested in integrity, and eager to enact it. All of this foreshadows the final argument of this introduction: writing back is, for these users, a religious practice.

1.5 Writing Back as a Religious Practice

1.5.1 My Research Questions

In this introduction, I have painted a landscape—of evangelicalism, of a moment in recent history, of relevant scholarship from the fields of writing studies, rhetoric, and religious studies, of a generation of raised-evangelicals who are contending with the novel and profoundly weird rhetorical situation of writing on social media about their religious practice and convictions. It is from this landscape that my research questions emerged—and so below I review my research questions and describe the development of my analytical category, "writing back," using research, observation, and the perspectives of my interview participants. This dissertation asks the question, "how do raised-evangelicals use social media writing to reconfigure their religious identities?" The more granular research questions that guide my inquiry are as follows:

1. What resources, strategies, and behaviors pattern the writing of raised-evangelicals who are using social networking sites to "write back" to the white evangelical communities in which they were raised?

   a. *In what ways do raised-evangelicals "write back" on social networking sites?*

   b. *What rhetorical resources do raised-evangelical writers draw upon when they address white evangelical audience(s) on those sites?*

2. What values and ideas do these writers invoke when speaking about their choices to write, and their choices about how to write, back to those communities on social networking sites?

   a. *What factors shape the choices these writers make?*

   b. *What ethical frameworks do they leverage to describe why they made those choices?*

3. How do raised-evangelical social media writers negotiate the responses that they receive?

My two central challenges in pursuing these questions emerged from the terms "raised-evangelicals," my shorthand for writers raised in white evangelicalism, and "writing back," both invented

categories. The first–raised-evangelicals–I have already framed in this introduction.[10] Because it is a sampling concern, I speak to demographic constraints in Chapter 2 (Methods). I further explore participants self-identification and definitions of white evangelicalism in Chapter 3. The second, "writing back," was similarly defined in consultation with participants. I turn now to the definitions of the term that I provided and which my participants confirmed and nuanced in our interviews and in the writing they identified as "writing back."

1.5.2 Defining "Writing Back"

I have foregrounded in this introduction my own experiences with and connections to the evangelical world; I say more about both in Chapter 2, in which I outline my positionality and relevant biographical details as well as how I chose to handle those and uphold my responsibilities as a researcher. My biography, though, is most relevant as a starting point–it was my own experiences and observations of my personal social media feeds that first sparked my thinking about "writing back" as a category of rhetorical activity for people raised in conservative religious communities with which they no longer align or identify. My initial impressions of the construct emerged from my own experiences–an interaction with a conservative evangelical relative on Facebook decrying the allegations of sexual assault against then-nominee to the Supreme Court, Brett M. Kavanaugh, and a post I wrote for the alumni blog of my Christian college's English Department about my confusion and anger at continued evangelical support for Donald Trump in 2020. In the summer of 2020, I also witnessed many friends, acquaintances, and former classmates post consistently about their

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[10] As the opening of this introduction recounts, the term "exvangelical" has emerged as a popular descriptor for people who once identified as evangelical but no longer do. Because of its emergence as a collective label driven by a vocal group of new media figures, it often implies a particular path or kind of relationship to childhood religious practice and also includes a secondary group, those who were not raised in church but at one point converted to evangelicalism and have since left it. Because my study depends on the freedom of my participants to articulate their own relationship to evangelicalism and also centers generational relationships, I don't use this term to describe my research participants.

support for Black Lives Matter, sharing critiques of police brutality, photos from protests, and petitions supporting charges against the officers who killed George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Content about "purity culture" (see "The emergence of "white" evangelicalism," above) and evangelical attitudes toward sex, sexuality, and conservative gender roles had showed up consistently on my newsfeeds for years, critiques less bound to specific events but no less strident.

My definition of "writing back" was refined over the course of conducting this study; indeed, one of this project's interventions is a more robust schema for the many ways raised-evangelicals conceptualize their responses to evangelical norms and values. Because of my prior encounters with this kind of writing, I anticipated direct critique of evangelical leaders, institutions, and political positions would comprise much of the data collected from my participants. While many of my participants encountered the survey through brief social media posts, my longer form recruitment materials[11] like Facebook posts and emails included the following descriptor of what I was looking for, which doubles as an initial definition of "writing back": I sought writers in the target demographic "who have taken to social media (any platform) in order to

1. Take a position other than the position identified with their religious community of origin
2. Push back on a position that is identified with their religious community of origin
3. Complicate or raise questions about a position identified with their religious community of origin."

My encounters with interviewees from very different social positions and religious lives made clear, however, that what constitutes "pushing back" looks very different for a non-binary musician from the West Coast who is not currently attending church than it does for a preacher, pastor's wife, and mom of two small children still deeply embedded in Midwestern megachurch that does not formally

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[11] See Appendix A.

support LGBTQ+ Christians in church leadership. As their social and religious worlds vary on- and off-line, so do the norms that define controversial behavior. "Writing back" for Beck involves "shit-posting"–their words–in response to everyday twitter users who express homophobic or hypocritical positions and tweeting condemnatory Bible verses at public figures like Florida senator Marco Rubio and former Georgia senator Kelly Loeffler, particularly when those users post their own Bible verses or talk about prayer. For Olivia, expressing views about what qualifies someone for church leadership is an invitation to controversy–her activity, primarily on Facebook and Instagram, participates in evangelical discourse norms, including asking for prayer and explicating Bible verses, implying a narrower and more spiritualized frame for what constitutes a controversial statement. While "controversy" is not inherent or necessary to qualify a post as "writing back" to evangelical communities, the construct does imply a certain amount of risk–the risk of pushback, or of distancing oneself from a community to which one had belonged. For that reason, "writing back" does not, for the purposes of this study, include anonymous posting. This project focuses on everyday writers producing and sharing content under their own names.[12]

The study's sharpening focus on risky writing directed to known audiences within white evangelicalism has several implications for its scope. First, I talk more about Facebook than other platforms. In this project, I collected writing from users of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Sometimes users had accounts on all three platforms, and their use of each informed the other– Twitter users, in particular, sometimes screenshotted and shared Tweets on their Facebook pages, or drew on Twitter debates and trends when they made statements on other platforms. (I return in later chapters to discussion of the ways that Twitter drove internet culture and had an outsize role in how writers thought about social media and what happened there.) I reviewed their writing on all

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[12] For more discussion about the methods by which I refined my definition, see Chapter 2, "Data Collection."

accounts they named to me, but only collected posts from the account they identified as the site of their "writing back." For writers with an active Facebook account, that was–without exception–the place. As an older platform, it hosts older relationships; writers also exhibited a strong "platform awareness"–what Gold et al. describe as "an implicit rhetorical understanding of what each social networking site or writing platform is 'for.'" (Facebook is associated in their review with a "broad, general audience.")

The second implication to which I draw attention here is a greater focus on writers who had closer ties to white evangelicalism, both in terms of their own social position and their temporal distance from institutional affiliations. For example, at least one participant, who had left evangelical churches a number of years before the study, reported regularly culling their Facebook friends lists– not just to block unwelcome commenters, but for privacy reasons, to limit the information access of acquaintances made in the distant past. This meant their social world online included few followers within white evangelicalism to whom posts might be directed. But more significantly, a focus on writing to known audiences foregrounds the experiences of writers for whom the costs of maintaining ties to evangelical audiences have been more bearable. Friction seemed to increase directly, if unevenly, with the writers' distance from the white heterosexual family life so celebrated within white American evangelicalism; in member-checking, one participant wondered aloud about the differences between the audience negotiations of those who could "pass" and those whose lives and identities visibly conflicted with white evangelical norms. Those with minority sexual and gender identities, in particular, were less engaged in "writing back" during 2020 than those representing dominant groups; Many factors, both internal and contextual, shape participants' choices about how to navigate their relationships white evangelicalism, its communities and institutions; this project can only gesture at how the nuances of race, gender, and sexual orientation show up in the writing participants posted and their interview comments. I raise this here to own the limitations of this

study's scope and affirm the need for further scholarship the specifically considers the writing back of raised-evangelicals from marginalized subject positions, including LGBTQ+ raised-evangelicals and raised-evangelicals of color, particularly those whose identities are highly visible.

1.6 Dissertation Overview

Having painted a landscape of evangelicalism in the United States at two key moments, the 1990s-2000s and "long" 2020, invoked the unique relationship of evangelical identity to media technology, explored the technological and generational shifts that led to the emergence both of white evangelicalism as a category and raised-evangelical social media writers as an available group for study, I turn to an overview of my dissertation. I begin with Chapter 2, my methods chapter, to more carefully detail my own positionality, how I framed the study and collected data, and my approach to its analysis. Guided by the central question of this dissertation, "How do raised-evangelicals use social media writing to reconfigure their religious identities?" I have organized my findings in three chapters. Responding to that central question required first attending to participant definitions. Chapter 3, "What Does (White) Evangelicalism Mean to You?" is titled after the survey question whose data it addresses; it builds on this introduction's discussion of the emergence of the category of white evangelicalism and more granularly considers the generational experiences and political ends that make white evangelicalism a useful shorthand for these writers. Chapter 4, A Bearable Witness, argues for witness as a flexible decision-making frame that draws on the rhetorical resources of the evangelical tradition to negotiate algorithm-mediated writing contexts. Chapter 5, Critique Reframed, considers how those writers build trust through their identity construction online and deploy two overlapping strategies–empathy and endorsement–to stretch that trust in new directions. Finally, in Chapter 6, I offer networks as a paradigm for understanding religious identity,

identifying directions for new research that might illuminate these writers' efforts to imagine a new

religious collective in which they might more comfortably claim membership.

Chapter 2 Methods

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter One, I argued that "writing back," for raised-evangelical American Christians, involves both bridge-building and critique; in both cases, writers muster familiar religious and rhetorical resources to bolster their resistance to the orthodoxy of the Christian Right. The writers in this dissertation study occupy an under-examined intersection of social media writing, religious rhetoric, and American religious and political identity, the study of which has stakes for multiple fields of research. Much of the work illuminating the decision-making and rhetorical strategies of social media writers follows writers speaking to unknown audiences in comment sections, Reddit threads, and other interest-based discourse communities, or focuses exclusively on social media behavior or political talk online without speaking directly to the writers enacting it. Scholarship on religious identity and religious rhetoric struggles to capture the experiences and choices of a cohort of religious Americans who resist labels or hold them loosely; scholars of American evangelicalism continue to debate what it is, who is in it, and what it means to disaffiliate. In my dissertation, I engage these questions through the experiences of my thirteen raised-evangelical study participants. Speaking to these writers and reading their social media posts illuminates how this group of everyday Americans thinks about the political expression of their religious values, the factors that shape the choices they make about if and when to engage politics on social networking sites, and the strategies they deploy to do so; examining how raised-evangelicals who remain religious talk to their communities of origin and about the political stakes of their faith will indicate the possible futures of Christianity in American public life.

In this chapter, I outline the methods I used to explore the rhetorical activity and decision-making of raised-evangelical social media writers. I describe my study design and data sources, research site, data collection processes, data analysis, and research ethics. In the latter section, I discuss my positionality as a scholar of writing and religion and my negotiation of my identities throughout the activities described below.

2.2 Study Design

Many studies of religious rhetorics and social media discourse succeed in their projects without speaking directly to the writers who produced the material under investigation. For example, Bethany Mannon's *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* essay on "Xvangelicals," among the first scholarly engagements in rhetoric and writing studies with emerging post-evangelical religious categories, examined the work of Christian writers Sarah Bessey and Jen Hatmaker. However, such an approach works best with public figures whose writing is necessarily and widely accessible; their audience negotiation then necessarily engages mostly strangers, critics, or fans, rather than friends. Survey results and interviews provide much greater access to the work of everyday writers–people who do not have, and are not presently attempting to cultivate, a significant following–and to the decision-making those writers do when writing primarily to people they intimately know. Because this study is invested in the multiple directions people take when renegotiating a childhood faith, not only in terms of the range of rhetorical choices, but of the identities, affiliations, networks, and relationships to that past, direct contact with the writers was essential.

This approach also allows more robust exploration of those shifting identity labels. A growing body of quantitative research suggests the instability of the identifier "evangelical" in the Trump, and post-Trump, years. Anecdotal evidence, including from high profile evangelical leaders, indicates reluctance on the part of non-Trump-supporting Christians to identify with the label, and

Pew Religion Research showed that those who opposed Trump were "significantly more likely" to drop the label between 2016 and 2020, but the overall numbers were low. Instead, there was an input: "White Americans who viewed Trump favorably and did not identify as evangelicals in 2016 were much more likely than White Trump skeptics to begin identifying as born-again or evangelical Protestants by 2020" (Smith, "More White"). Interview and observation-based research can support sense-making of the shifting religious landscape by providing indications about how raised evangelicals define evangelicalism, adopt or reject the evangelical label, and categorize themselves.

Qualitative research is well positioned to support and challenge our understanding of the ways people understand their own beliefs, practices, and identities (Merriam & Tisdell 15), and particularly so in a moment of instability for many of the major terms, institutions, and social networking sites surrounding questions of religious Americans' political talk. I designed a mixed methods study drawing on survey responses, interviews, and social media observations.[13] Below, I briefly detail the rationale for each data source and its role in the findings presented in this dissertation. I begin, however, by discussing my own position as a scholar and a member of religious communities and adjacent discourse communities on social media and the ways it informed and shaped my work on this study.

2.2.1 Positionality

In her review of positionality statements in published articles on religious rhetorics, Kelly Sauskojus notes that writers often limit their discussion of positionality to the relationship of their

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[13] The survey was developed through a brief pilot study in the fall of 2021, in which I tested the instrument with four social media writers who identified in the appropriate age range. These individuals were recruited through my personal contacts and varied in race, gender, sexuality, and childhood religious backgrounds within evangelicalism; all of them had participated in online activity that could be loosely categorized as "writing back." Because the pilot study was confined to cognitive interviewing about the survey instrument, I did not collect substantial demographic information about those writers or their social media activity.

experiences and identities to the motivations, or origin story, of the scholarship in question; rarely do scholars take the riskier step of addressing the ways in which their analysis and interpretation of the data has been shaped by those identities (Buller-Young et al.). To respond to this challenge toward more reflective research ethics, I have chosen to frame my methods chapter with two sections addressing positionality. Here I outline my understanding of positionality as a qualitative researcher and briefly describe the motivations for this study, which emerged from my own experience. In the "Research Ethics" section, which follows descriptions of data collection and analysis, I discuss the ways in which I negotiated the affordances of my own identities and perspectives while conducting this study.

Scholars of religious rhetorics have taken up the arguments of indigenous, feminist, and cultural rhetorics that research is not a "disembodied intellectual experience" (Buller-Young et al.), using Roxanne Mountford's language to describe the "robust emotional connection" that researchers bring to their work in contrast to the construction of objectivity or neutrality often imagined as the foundation of empirical scholarship (15). Catherine Matthews Pavia names this tension directly, noting both the tendency to speak imprecisely or talk around religion in academic scholarship, and the deeply personal nature of religious faith that undergirds the instinct to sidestep precision. All human subjects research demands attention to the positionality of the researcher vis-a-vis the subject(s) under examination, but the study of religious rhetoric and religious writers demands particular attention to religious aspects of the researcher's own background, socialization, and experience: "because faith and religion are so intertwined with identity, representation of participants' beliefs can be difficult to negotiate, as can the influence of a researcher's own religious or nonreligious beliefs" ("Taking Up Faith" 339). Taking up the work of scholars like Anthea Butler and Jemar Tisby who name the deep entanglements of white evangelicalism with white supremacy, I extend Pavia's arguments to race as well. Because race and religion are so intertwined in the United

States, scholars of religion must attend particularly to both features of their own identities and the intersections between them.

The origin story of this study is deeply tied to my own experiences of social media during the year 2020 and the Trump years more broadly. Like many scholars of Digital Studies, Writing Studies, and American Religion, and indeed many scholars of evangelicalism, I am writing here about a world that I know well. My own background is in the Christian Reformed Church of North America, a majority white Protestant denomination founded by Dutch immigrants in the nineteenth century from whom I am descended. As a child, I understood my family to be "reformed," rather than "evangelical"; nonetheless, the CRCNA is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals and, with historical ties to several major Christian publishers, a robust participant in the media culture by which Kristin Kobes Du Mez defines evangelicalism. My father, brother, father-in-law, and spouse are ordained ministers in the Reformed tradition. I, like my participants and many progressive-leaning younger Christians, have a complicated relationship with my home tradition; I am, for example, profoundly troubled by its historical treatment of indigenous peoples and disagree strongly with both popular views and denominational policies about gender and sexuality upheld by that community. I am also attentive to the variation in religious belief and practice; I spent my childhood in denominationally diverse Christian circles in the US and Europe and my formative young adult years in an urban and politically mixed church full of professors, so I was aware early in life that not all Christians believed the same things and indeed, some Christians voted for Democrats. The Christianity of the Moral Majority was, however, robustly present in those pews and in the wider social networks of most of its congregants–which were, like the churches, overwhelmingly white.

So I, too, had interactions with conservative relatives on Facebook about now-Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh during his confirmation hearings and tense Instagram DMs with my

spouse's childhood friend when she posted misinformation about sex trafficking to her stories. Like the participants I spoke to for this study, I remember each of these interactions with startling clarity. I was at this time also a regular contributor to my college English department's alumni blog which hosted a lot of work I would describe as "writing back"; whenever I published something in that vein, I would agonize over it such that I could almost recite the whole piece from memory. From about 2015 onward, I also saw a lot of people from my Christian high school posting online about climate change, immigration, police brutality, LGBTQ rights, abortion, their disapproval of Republican policies and politicians or their support for Democratic ones–making statements that, while not particularly surprising to me, not infrequently garnered public pushback from (and likely behind-the-scenes tensions) with conservative evangelical friends and relatives.

My observation and personal experience of this kind of writing suggested it was a wider experience, both fraught and formative for the writers doing it, and worth examining more broadly. I was curious how others experienced and navigated those interactions–were they considering their libertarian uncles or pro-life cousins when they posted? Why did they respond, or not, to comments? How were they navigating the ways their convictions about democracy, justice, and Christianity put them in direct tension with their childhood role models in church? These questions, which began as reflections on my own social media experiences, led me to the project outlined in this dissertation. How I navigated my intimacy with this subject in my role as a researcher is something I will discuss further in the "Research Ethics" section, alongside notes about the critical self-reflection required for me to conduct this study with integrity.

2.2.2 Sample

Making reasonable claims about the rhetorical activity of a cohort of writers engaged in political and religious talk requires some parameters around that cohort of writers, as well as

attention to variation within it. Therefore, my sampling strategy was two-fold. First, I used "criterion-based sampling" based on participants' age, social media activity, self-identification as having been raised in white evangelicalism, and self-identification as still religious to build a cohort of raised-evangelicals with shared characteristics. Second, I used a variety of demographic factors to maximize the range of experiences represented in that cohort.

The rationale for my criterion-based sampling focused on shared formative political, religious, and media experiences, for which birth year can often provide a useful shorthand. I focused this study on younger millennials, born in the years 1986-1996. In 2020, the time period on which this study focuses, these writers would have been 23-34 years old. I selected these age cut-offs for several reasons: first, by beginning my age range at twenty-three, after which college-going adults have likely graduated and 4-5 years after the typical age of high school graduation, I can assume that the writers have established themselves socially as well as legally as adults. Secondly, because of the political nature of the writing under consideration in this study, I chose to focus on writers who were already adults at the time of the election of Donald Trump, and therefore have an awareness of public discourse about religion and politics that precedes the 2016 election. Thirdly, these years roughly map onto those the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan "fact tank," has named as the "millennial" generation (b. 1981-1996) (Dimock). This alignment offers some ease of reference–the generational designation does indicate a core of shared experience and circumstance, particularly in terms of the political and cultural history of white evangelicalism and the history of digital technology; the writers would have presumably adopted social media platforms as young adults and used them to navigate social relationships for a significant time before the inception of this study. Furthermore, to be eligible, writers must have used social media to write back to home communities about issues on which they disagree, which required them to remain active on social media during the data collection period (if, for example, a writer had performed this activity but deleted their

account before the inception of the study, for example, I would not have been able to collect those writing samples). Finally, I restricted the study to American writers, though broadly defined–those who hold American citizenship, and those who reside in the United States of America, or both–in order to align with my focus on this nation's political and religious life.

I furthermore focused this study on participants who retained a commitment to Christianity as adults. This proved to be a nebulous categorization, particularly during the pandemic when common forms of religious practice–e.g., church attendance–were significantly disrupted, and I can make no claims about how participants identify even at time of writing. I can only say that when they responded to the survey, and when I spoke with them in interviews, they expressed that they understood themselves as Christian, even if not all would affirm the label "evangelical." I limited the study to these parties for several reasons. First, I was interested primarily in "writing back" that was addressed to a community in which the participant had relational stake and with whom they still identified in some way, and I presumed that people who had absolutely left organized religion, converted to another religion, or now identified as atheist would tend to have an oppositional relationship to their evangelical home communities that would support a different and less dialogic rhetorical stance. Secondly, such wide variation of religious affiliation and practice as was drawn even in my survey pool–more on that below–would severely limit my ability to make coherent claims; among a group of raised-evangelicals including those who were regular church-goers, assertive atheists, wiccans, and converts to Judaism, any researcher would struggle to articulate a common rhetorical practice with integrity.

However, within my defined cohort of still-mostly-Christian raised-evangelical social media writers who lived in the United States and were born in the determined age range, I sought to represent in my study as wide a range of perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds as possible, a "sample chosen to maximize range" (Weiss 23). This purposive sampling strategy served multiple

purposes, not least of which is to extend and challenge the limits of my own perspective by soliciting accounts that differed significantly from both my own experience and from one another. In building my interview pool, a process I outline in the "Data Collection" section, I considered the following demographic factors: birth year within the defined range, education, profession, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, marital or partnership status, parents and non-parents, the region in which the participant grew up, region in which the participant lived at the time of survey response. Including demographic variation enabled me to account in some way for the impacts of features like geography, education level, and profession on the writing and religious identities of my participants; factors like race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, marriage and family status were particularly important because so much discomfort with mainstream white evangelicalism emerges from identity-based tension, or the individual's inability or unwillingness to fulfill expected roles. Including the accounts of, for example, white mothers married to men, as well as non-binary people of color, served also to expand the range and kind of dissonances participants navigated while writing back to their white evangelical connections online. While those specific tensions and the subsequent misogyny, racism, queerphobia, or other forms of exclusion and discrimination raised-evangelicals might experience are not the primary focus of this study, they often precede the rhetorical engagements with which this research is concerned, and certainly shape the strategies of self-presentation, audience management, and boundary-setting with which this project is concerned.

I also considered the kinds of experiences participants reported in childhood, including denominational affiliation and engagement with other evangelical institutions and traditions including K-12 Christian education, Christian higher education, and homeschooling. I also sought to include in my pool writers with varying relationships to the church as adults: those who still identified as evangelical, those who were active in non-evangelical churches, and those who considered themselves Christian but do not attend church, excluding, for the purposes of this study,

48

those who have rejected religion entirely. This method enabled me to collect data representing a variety of experiences across writers raised in white evangelicalism, including "instances of all important dissimilar forms present in the population," and additionally to identify common patterns across the range of experiences represented"[14] (Weiss 23).

2.2.3 Surveys and Interviews

Study participants provided data directly in two ways: via an initial survey and an interview series. The survey used for this project had two purposes. First, it enabled me to collect a large pool of writers who fit my criteria as raised-evangelical social media writers and enough information to determine their eligibility for an interview and, where appropriate, extend an interview request. Secondly, it provided preliminary data about the survey respondents' attitudes toward, feelings about, and habits around writing back to evangelical communities on social media that can contextualize my interviews and inform my interview technique. That data also enabled me to assess my interview data and observation data in a wider context of raised-evangelical social media activity and decision-making. The larger corpus of sample posts submitted by survey respondents, definitions of white evangelicalism and "writing back," and information about past and present religious identifications and practices offered a wider view of the trends and themes represented in the narrower, if deeper, dataset culled from interviews and social media observation.

Patton writes that "the purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (qtd. In Merriam & Tisdell, p. 108). Interviews—both before and after I had gained access to and observed participants' social media activity—provided access to a more complex picture of the writers' perspectives and interior lives. I chose to ground my study in the diversity of

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[14] In practice, my ability to do so was limited by the design of my survey; I regret that I failed to include a question regarding disability status and was subsequently unable to intentionally include representation from that demographic of raised-evangelicals.

experiences and responses represented by the writers themselves. Interview data was essential to learn about not only the writing participants produced, but what prompted the writing, how they thought and felt about it, how they made decisions to write and not to write, and how they negotiated the relationships behind the exchanges that took place on their social media feeds. Information about those experiences are essential to the research questions, and they are all features of social media writing which are not directly observable in the text produced (Merriam & Tisdell, 108). In short, I selected interviewing as a method because it gave me "more data or better data… than other tactics" (Dexter, qtd. In Merriam & Tisdell, 109).

2.2.4 Social Media Observation

In addition to data directly provided by participants, I collected data from their social media profiles. Social media observation–a term I use here to refer to gaining access to participants' social media profiles and screenshot and screen-recording to collect posts that referenced religion and/or politics, or social media activity that otherwise aligned with the participants' definitions of "writing back"–supplemented the interview data in several ways. First, it enabled me to explore research questions about rhetorical choices; I could explore both patterns within the corpus produced by a single writer and explore patterns of similar activity across a number of study participants. Second, it informed my interview questions and data analysis. Reviewing participants' social media activity– seeing not only their posts about politics and religion, but posts about birthdays, vacations, dance recitals, home projects, and other aspects of their daily life–enriched my understanding of the networks, relationships, and experiences that informed the participant's writing and enabled me to refine my interview questions. Thirdly, observing participants' social media enabled me to triangulate interview data and assess the relationship between how participants described and narrated their activity and what the activity itself revealed. For a population of writers that were, as the study

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revealed, deeply preoccupied with integrity and reflection, this method of drawing their attention

back to their own writing was useful for prompting rich interview data; it also anchored their

thinking in a specific time period which was especially important given the retrospective nature of

the study itself.

2.2.5 Site selection

Because my study focuses primarily on the decision-making of social media writers, I did not

limit my study to a specific platform. Instead, I treat the choice of platform as another decision that

writers make when negotiating their desire to express an emotion, idea, or position, and engage

particular audience(s). In the survey, I listed several options: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit,

and TikTok. I also allowed participants to input additional sites, which a few did–e.g., Twitch, a

streaming platform used by gamers, and Discord, a server also associated with gaming communities

but increasingly used for closed groups of various kinds, including fan communities or patrons of

particular podcasts, newsletters, or other media. However, both in their survey selections and in

interviews, participants indicated that they did not use these for the kind of "writing back" the study

addresses–as discussed in this dissertation's introduction, participants typically described their

activity as "writing back" when it was directed to specific or generalized evangelical readers and

when the writer held a goal of influencing that audience's beliefs and behaviors in the direction of

the writer's own ethical convictions, Platforms like Twitch, Discord, and even TikTok are newer,

meaning users are less likely to have connections from a childhood or past in which the user was

deeply connected to their religious community of origin and they tend to be topically themed,

limiting the extent to which members of a Discord server organized around Marvel movie fandom

or Fantasy Football discuss other topics. Users cannot effectively "write back" to a community that

isn't present, active, or to whom they are not connected on the platform in question. Even online

communities adjacent to the study topically—e.g., the Discord server for patrons of the podcast *Straight White American Jesus*, hosted by two scholars of religion who analyze white evangelical politics and culture—are premised on shared critiques. While members of such a group almost certainly engage in debate and discussion, that writing takes place in a closed, patrons-only system in which white evangelicals or white evangelicalism as a culture is not as viable a potential audience. The sites I ultimately reviewed for this study were selected and confirmed by the participants, who reported using Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for the kind of work they, and I, understood as "writing back."

2.3 Data Collection

In this section, I detail my process for collecting survey, interview, and observation data for this study, as well as participant recruitment and remuneration. The writers who received and accepted interview requests were identified from the survey response pool with the explicit goal of maximizing the range of the sample to represent the diversity of the target population and enhance the range of perspectives available to me, the researcher. I conducted data collection between January and November of 2022. During the writing process, I identified a few gaps in my observation records; therefore, a few of the posts were collected at later points in 2023.

2.3.1 Survey Publication and Distribution

Survey recruitment for this study took place entirely online. I used a number of platforms and strategies to distribute the link, including email, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts on my personal accounts. All survey promotion took place in January and February 2022.

2.3.1.1 Email

I used my University of Michigan email account to share the survey link with the listserv associated with my graduate program, which includes other students and some faculty. I also emailed pilot study participants from this account to thank them, share the updated survey, and invite them to share the link with friends. I also shared the link via email with friends and family members and invited them to share with their networks. (In this case, I used my personal account because this would be the recognized address from which they had received email from me in the past. This group included alumni of 11+ different Christian colleges as well as people affiliated with evangelical student ministries (e.g., the Navigators), and graduates of at least two evangelical seminaries. Five of these friends cc-ed me or emailed to let me know they had shared the link more broadly. Others may have; if they didn't cc me or self-report, I have no record.

2.3.1.2 Social Media

On my private Facebook account, I made 3 posts between January 10 and February 5. I also chose to post in several groups of which I am a member that I could reasonably surmise included some members of the target population; these were the alumni groups for the English department of my Christian college, my off-campus semester sponsored by another Christian college, and an international service-learning program associated with Mennonite Central Committee, as well as a group for writers who have contributed to a blog run by my college English department. On my private Instagram account, I made 1 post to my feed; I also shared the link in my stories 4 times between January 10 and February 1. Promotion of the survey link took place before I narrowed the platforms under consideration, I also made posts on three reddit forums: r/Exvangelical, r/OpenChristian, and r/RadicalChristianity, all fora associated with discussions about progressive Christianity where I could reasonably assume some users were raised-evangelicals who differed politically and theologically from the mainstream of white evangelicalism in 2022.

My Twitter account was, at the time, public, so I made use of hashtags and quoted relevant tweets to spread the link; I posted the link and/or quote-tweeted my original call for survey-takers seven times between January 10, 2022, and February 4, 2022. My largest number of impressions almost certainly came from an external source: I reached out to Dr. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne,* cited in this dissertation, with whom I audited a class as an undergraduate; she retweeted my call for survey takers to her tens of thousands of followers, several of whom also retweeted it and shared it with their networks. I expect, then, that most survey-takers found the link from that tweet.[15]

Dr. Du Mez was not my only advocate on social media. On Facebook, my original call for survey-takers was shared 13 times by family members and friends, and a reminder post was shared twice. A number of people tagged eligible friends in the comments of my original post or of the shared posts. One friend from college made her own post on Facebook sharing the survey and tagged me. She also told me via email she had shared the link in the Facebook group associated with Pantsuit Politics, a podcast foregrounding "grace-filled political conversations," and reported that she asked a friend to share it in the Facebook group associated with fans of the Liturgists podcast, which is branded for "the spiritually homeless"; one of their original hosts is a former worship director and musician. It is, of course, possible that others made posts on these or other platforms of which I am unaware. If they did not tag me in those posts, I would have no record of them.

Finally, I was at the time a regular contributor to *the post calvin*, the alumni blog run by my college English department. I had written several times about my developing research interests and made reference to dissertation-writing; my January 2022 contribution described the experience of

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[15] Because of the changes to Twitter, now known as X, instituted by new owner Elon Musk after he purchased the platform in 2022, and the subsequent decision of many users to delete their accounts, I no longer have access to accurate numbers of impressions associated with these promotional tweets.

promoting the survey and included a footnote with the link. I shared this post on my own Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts in addition to the posts described above, and it was posted by the blog's Facebook page. While direct traffic to the site is, in my understanding, rare, it is possible that survey-takers encountered the survey link on the site, in an email triggered by their subscription to the site, or through links to this post on social media.

2.3.2 Survey Responses

The survey went live on January 10, 2022, and I addressed responses that came in through February 7, 2022.[16] In this time period, Qualtrics logged 1037 responses. The respondents fell into several categories:

1. Respondents who opened the link and entered no information.

2. Respondents who opened the link and entered some information but failed to complete the survey.

3. Respondents who submitted a complete survey response.[17]

4. Respondents who opened the link but were routed out of the survey because their responses indicated they were not eligible.

Following the closure of the survey on February 7, I downloaded the data into Microsoft Excel for ease of manipulation. My primary goal at this stage was to narrow responses to a pool of potential interviewees. In order to do so, I eliminated all surveys that were incomplete or ineligible. I used the

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[16] Responses to the survey continued to come in until February 28, two weeks after the link had closed. This was a function of the Qualtrics settings, which allowed participants who had opened the link to return to the survey and finish it later, and allotted two weeks for them to do so. I failed to anticipate this in my closure of the link on February 7; the 1037 responses addressed here are those that had a "recorded date" between January 10-February 7. 52 responses came in after that–only two of which were complete. I did not consider these in my sample; by the time I discovered them, I had already defined my interview pool using the methods outlined here.

[17] In a few cases, writers who had completed the survey emailed me directly with screenshots of their social media writing. Because I did not have space in this dissertation to robustly engage the screenshots submitted by survey participants, I did not analyze this data directly, but I did retain it in the corpus.

demographic questions at the end of the survey as a criterion for completion–if the respondent had not answered those questions, their responses were already unusable, because I could not proceed with my sampling strategy unless I knew which identities the respondent claimed; if they had answered them, I could deduce that they had clicked through the full survey, rather than abandoning their response. Eligibility at this stage was determined by binary responses to questions. In this case, that meant that they were responding from an IP address outside the United States, they indicated a birth year outside of the specified range for eligibility, and/or they said "no" when asked "Do you think of yourself as having been raised (or grown up) in white evangelicalism?" (More nuanced determinations of eligibility–e.g., did this person still identify as Christian? Does this person indeed do something I recognize as "writing back" on social media?–required more detailed review, addressed below). Once these incomplete and ineligible responses had been eliminated, 237 responses remained for consideration.

2.3.3 Interview Participant Selection

Following the closure of the survey link, I began the process of sorting the completed survey responses by study eligibility. While the survey had restricted responses from participants who did not meet the age criteria, lived outside the United States, and/or did not select "yes" when asked if they identified as having been raised in white evangelicalism, the survey response pool included a much wider array of contemporary religious identities and affiliations than the sample set out in my study. Therefore, further analysis and filtering was required to identify willing and eligible interview participants.

I began by narrowing my pool down to only those respondents who indicated that they were willing to be contacted for future research. While this question was initially designed to elicit consent to receive an invitation to projects other than the dissertation, I determined that it also indicated

willingness to participate in the interview portion of the study, which requires significantly more investment on the part of the candidate than the survey alone. Next, I reviewed the list and eliminated anyone I knew personally, including former classmates, friends, and friends of friends whose names I recognized. Finally, I filtered out those who expressly indicated that they were atheist, agnostic, or otherwise non-Christian in response to one or more of two questions: "what is your current religious affiliation (e.g. denomination)?" and "In a sentence or two, how would you describe your religious beliefs and practices now?" In this review I drew on Jonathan Z. Smith's assertion that religion is a tool of the scholar and can be defined in many ways, a variability that in fact animates the field of religious studies, and in the definition advanced by Shari Rabin in *Jews on the Frontier*, describing religion as "a mobile assemblage of resources" (7). If respondents indicated that they used recognizably Christian resources in their religious life–defined as beliefs, practices, print, digital, and material culture emerging from that tradition–and did not disavow an identification with Christianity, I included them in this stage. In some cases, respondents did not offer enough information to make a clear determination–for example, some wrote that they were "deconstructing," a flexible term that may describe reconsidering specific beliefs, leaving a particular tradition, and/or disaffiliating from Christianity, among other paths. In the case that there was not enough information to categorize a respondent, I eliminated them from the pool.

Next, I constructed a number of demographic tables to determine the breakdown of my group of eligible respondents by several demographic factors, including denominational affiliation, gender, sexuality, race, location, education level, relationship status, and whether or not they were raising children, in accordance with the sampling strategy to maximize range set out in the study design. For each of these factors, I calculated the percentages–so, for example, if my final participant group were representative of the larger group of eligible interviewees on this count, how many would be in a non-heterosexual partnership? How many would be parents? While I did not adhere

to these targets absolutely, I used them as a reference point as I returned to and read through the eligible survey responses.

Finally, I read through responses in two stages, focusing on the open response questions in which participants provided the richest information about their beliefs, views, and social media habits. These questions include:

1. In a sentence or two, how would you describe your religious beliefs, and practices now?

2. In a sentence or two, how would you describe your political affiliations and beliefs now?

3. In a sentence or two, what does "white evangelicalism" mean to you?

4. Would you describe any of your social media activity as "writing back" to evangelical communities–for example, posts, comments, or shared content that you implicitly or explicitly directed at people you know in those communities, or to evangelicals in general? Why or why not?

Responses positioned the writers with respect to the tradition in which they were raised, often included narrative elements about their relationships with members of that tradition, or further data about the complications of their relationship and how that manifested in their social media writing over long periods of time.

Focusing on responses to the above questions, I first highlighted particularly compelling respondents, a subjective judgment that reflected in part respondents who carried identities less represented in the overall survey sample that would serve to help me maximize range, and also respondents for whom the length and specificity of their responses to survey questions about their experiences with evangelicalism and writing back on social media indicated their good fit for the study. For example, if a participant seemed particularly reflective about their online experience, or so invested as to offer a lengthy response, I might identify that participant as a good candidate for an interview request. Then I returned to read the responses more carefully for religious identity and

openness to participation in the study (as indicated by responses to consent questions), differentiating those who after consideration were not a good fit for the study based on ambiguous responses to the religious beliefs and practices questions. At this stage, I eliminated from the pool any respondents who indicated they were unwilling to have their posts quoted in publication. At the end of this stage, I had 55 potential respondents. As this was significantly more than the 15 I planned to interview, I then undertook another round of reviews to narrow my shortlist of potential interviewees.

I proceeded to review the 55 potential respondents again, eliminating any ineligible participants or respondents unwilling to have their responses quoted whom I may have missed on the first pass. Because my research questions are best addressed by writers engaging other users with whom they have a personal connection, I also removed respondents who described themselves as professional writers, speakers, or thought leaders, or whose internet activity indicated that they were treating their social media as a professional space and building an online following. This determination was made by looking at the social media posts they submitted, reviewing free-form responses that described activities like writing books or producing content, and in some cases conducting an internet search of the respondent's name.[18] I once again flagged those respondents from whom I was most interested in hearing, using the same guidelines to maximize range and identify interested candidates. I also grouped similar responses to ensure the experience or sentiment was represented, but not duplicated; for example, if two respondents mentioned the specific challenges of living in a rural area, I retained just one of them. This process involved a significant amount of mixing and matching, adding, deleting, and re-adding respondents based on demographic

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[18] I should note that this effort was successful only to the extent of the information available; during later data collection, I discovered that several of the participants had maintained blogs at some point in the late 2010s and at least two had published professional writing in evangelical publications.

factors I wanted to represent in the pool. In one case, I returned to the original complete answer set to locate writers from underrepresented demographics and issued an invitation to a participant who had not consented to be invited for future research but had consented to participate in this study. That participant accepted an interview request.

In my first round of requests, I sent 15 invitations, all via email, and received 10 affirmative replies. I emailed once, sent a reminder a week later, and then moved on to recruiting additional participants based on the replies I received. For the second set of emails, I reviewed gaps in the pool and determined 5 additional invitations to extend, from which I received 2 replies within two weeks. Finally, I sent one additional invitation to address a gap in the educational experiences represented in the pool. In total, I ended up with 13 participants from 21 interview requests.

2.3.4 First Interviews

First interviews took place between February 21 and March 19, 2022, over Zoom. The interviews varied in length from just under 60 minutes to 105 minutes, a reflection of both their semi-structured nature, in which I tailored follow-up questions and prompts to the participants' responses, and participants' eagerness to expand on their responses to my questions. I recorded the interviews using Zoom's record-to-Cloud feature and took notes by hand; I typed up the notes the day of or day after the interview, expanding on my notes with further reflection and addressing two additional questions: 1) what can I learn from this interview about the protocol or my own interviewing process? And 2) what follow-up reading or research might I do based on the themes and topics raised in this interview? I then destroyed the handwritten notes to preserve participant confidentiality. I downloaded the audio only file of the Zoom recording and pursued transcription. In eight cases, I trimmed the audio file, removing my logistical comments from the end of the recording (e.g., expect a follow up email tomorrow) and submitted them to Rev, a transcription

service. In five cases, I used Otter.ai's automated transcription service, which I then edited for accuracy. That decision was based primarily on the research funds I had available and wanting to allocate them to transcription for later interview rounds. When editing the transcriptions myself, I corrected proper nouns that had been incorrectly captured, eliminated references to the names of the participant themself and their friends or discussants online, and corrected formatting errors. I also included in brackets references to laughter, for example, where that might change the meaning of the statement as recorded.

In the follow-up email to the first interview, I used a Qualtrics form to collect information about what kind of incentive (check or card) the participant preferred, the appropriate mailing address, their preferred pseudonym should they want to choose their own, and to confirm the name and handle, name, or URL of their accounts on the platforms they used and from which they would allow me to collect data.

2.3.5 Social Media Observation

In order to access, observe, and collect posts on accounts not set to "public," I sent friend or follower requests–the appropriate terminology varies by platform–to the accounts participants had identified in their response to the form distributed following the first interview. On Twitter and Instagram, I used a "dummy" account created for the purposes of the study. On Facebook, I had to use my personal account. Meta's community standards prohibit the use of multiple Facebook accounts, and the company has a history of shutting down the accounts of researchers on the grounds that they have violated the terms of service ("Inauthentic Behavior," Ortutay). In this case, I added participants to a "restricted friends" list, which curtailed what information they could access about me to protect the privacy of my own friends and family. In one case, the participants' privacy

settings made it difficult for me to add her as a Facebook friend; she opted to send me a friend request instead of changing her settings.

I conducted my social media observations through two modalities: screenshots or recordings, and ethnographic notes. The first had a directed file management procedure developed in consultation with digital librarians at the University of Michigan. When I encountered a social media post I wanted to capture, I first determined whether I could fit all the information–the post, accompanying metadata like geotags and dates, comments, likes, and responses, etc.–in one screenshot; if not, I recorded my own screen as I scrolled through the information. Each screenshot or screen recording was named according to the same conventions, labeled by pseudonym, platform, date, and brief description, and uploaded to my secure University of Michigan google drive. It was logged according to that key in a google sheet that tracked the poster, platform, file name, any links shared, the text, a description, any notes I wanted to make, and the date of both post and collection. I used this sheet frequently to locate posts around a specific time period, e.g., January 6th, and to search across posts for similar themes. All told, I collected 891 posts from my observations, of which 877 were within the date range 12/01/2019-1/31/2021.

These numbers reflect a process that involved careful refinement of study parameters, including the platform, date range, and definition used to guide my identification of writing that might constitute "writing back." In the study's initial stages, I had relied on my participants' use of the survey recruitment materials for context clues and the oppositional connotation of the term, which sounds similar to "talking back," for example, or otherwise resisting the expectations or directives of an empowered figure or group; as I mentioned in the introduction, however, this construct narrowed over the course of the study. In order to refine my definition of "writing back" and make it more serviceable to data collection–determining, for example, which of a dozen Facebook posts were relevant to the study–I returned to the survey responses of my interviewees. I

compiled all their replies to the question, "Would you describe any of your social media activity as "writing back" to evangelical communities–for example, posts, comments, or shared content that you implicitly or explicitly directed at people you know in those communities, or to evangelicals in general? Why or why not?" and reviewed those responses for common features. The first was audience[19]–writing back is directed at a specific or generalized group of evangelicals–and the second, purpose.[20] The numerous responses that reflected both audience and purpose only serve to reinforce strong themes: participants characterize their posts as writing back when those posts are directed, implicitly or explicitly, at evangelical audiences with a goal of influencing their beliefs and behaviors; those posts tend to trade on the writer's shared experiences and historical relationships with evangelical readers, and they emerge from some kind of conviction that change is both necessary and somehow possible–through their social media writing, wrongs might be addressed and norms challenged.

While I had originally set out to address any social media writing, I chose to focus only on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I began the study capturing all relevant posts from each account,

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[19] Five of the thirteen interviewees featured in this study explicitly mentioned friends and acquaintances who remained in evangelicalism; for example, Beth wrote that she counts her social media activity as "writing back" "because I know I'm connected to many in that community, and I feel my voice matters. So I often speak my mind there in ways that may be difficult to speak in person." Another seven respondents used more abstract references to evangelical connections, sometimes described simply as "people"; for example, Kelly wrote that "I feel like I understand and have one foot in two worlds and always hope to help people hear each other better." The only response that I did not characterize as having an implied reference to evangelical audiences came from Felix, who wrote that "In some posts I've explicitly called out the hypocrisy of certain prominent white evangelicals. Others haven't been that explicit but they've been about what I consider fundamental blind spots in evangelical theology." I reasoned that this kind of rhetorical activity could have many audiences beyond evangelicalism, and did not invoke on-going personal relationships as a reference point for that activity.

[20] Three participants, including Anya, wrote explicitly that they wanted to influence their evangelical audiences: "I want wrongs to be addressed and I also want to invite people to change their mind." Two more talked about presenting alternative perspectives and/or inviting evangelical readers to consider them, like Alex, who wrote that he had "felt compelled to both write and share content on my own social media to both challenge the norms of my evangelical friends and to give hope to non believers and folks like me that white evangelicalism doesn't own Christianity." Five wrote explicitly about making critiques; for example, invoking both the audience theme, above, and purposes to both critique and influence, Christy wrote that "Facebook is where I write posts intended for conservatives/evangelicals from my childhood. I hope to show them a reasoned opposition and hope that because they knew me when I, too, was more conservative, they won't get their hackles up or immediately dismiss me."

but I eventually determined that participants tended to have a primary platform on which they did their "writing back"–usually Facebook. For example, a participant might have an account on all three platforms, they would most commonly use Twitter to read or engage news, pop culture, and other interests with peers, Instagram to post photos for friends, and Facebook to share and make statements directed to a wider social network, including friends and family members within the world of white evangelicalism. Furthermore, the volume of information produced across all three platforms proved very difficult to manage in a single dissertation study, necessitating a narrowing of my focus. As data collection continued, I chose to stop capturing posts from all of each participants' accounts. Instead, I focused on the platform that, based on interview discussions, my observations, and the example submissions in their survey, I could reasonably conclude was their primary avenue for the kind of rhetorical work captured under "writing back." I continued to review the participants' accounts on other platforms if they had them, but made notes rather than collecting screenshots.

I furthermore determined that I needed to narrow the time period under consideration; contemporaneous capture was both difficult and not particularly fruitful (e.g., if I wanted to capture disappearing stories, I would have to check participants' media every single day, and would still need to decide when to stop doing so), therefore, I focused on 2020 as a critical time period in which participants had done a great deal of writing back around the pandemic and American electoral politics. I also extended this on either side to capture some December 2019 references to presidential primaries and Donald Trump's first impeachment trial and to capture the many January 2021 references to the January 6 insurrection and the inauguration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr. on January 20. In the spirit of British historians, who dubbed the period 1688-1815 (or so) "the long eighteenth century" to reflect more natural historical shifts, I have dubbed my focus period "long 2020."

Because I narrowed the focus period during data collection, I have in my corpus some posts and discussions of posts that fall outside this range.

While this narrowing developed concurrently with data collection as I came to terms with the difficulty of collection and volume of data, the process of observation did take a defined shape. In each case, I created a document titled "Participant Ethnography" for the given participant in which I made notes and observations as I moved through 14 months of social media posts from each participant. In this document, I also tracked and reflected on delicate decisions that I made about what posts to screenshot or made notes about the kind of content the participant posted that I had chosen not to screenshot. In some cases, these distinctions were clear cut–a Facebook post about a Halloween costume, for example, or a meme about Star Wars, that was not discernibly religious or political in content could be skipped over. However, if that Facebook post of family photos included a caption describing the household's decisions to social distance for the holiday, I might weigh that post in the context of the participants' other social media activity to determine whether this, for that person, constituted a political statement directed at an evangelical audience.

Both my notes and determinations varied, participant to participant. Some posted almost exclusively political or religious content–Tim, or Christy, for example–so I captured just about everything and made a few notes about other content that I hadn't logged, as well as flagging posts and questions I wanted to raise with that person in the second interview. Beth and Ivy, on the other hand, were very frequent posters; getting an accurate picture of their activity involved more detailed notes that I organized by month. In this way, the ethnographies operated alongside the screenshots to provide an approximation of the study participants' activity alongside. My notes in these documents grew more detailed and more analytical over time, as I included more reflections on patterns across participants and had a better sense of what, then, I wanted to collect, and as I developed my claims that all participant social media activity operated as argument. Especially when

writing profiles featuring a single participant, I relied heavily on these notes, and sometimes returned

to the accounts directly (e.g., scrolling through the participants' Facebook to find a particular post or

to view it in wider context).

2.3.6 Second Interviews

Second round interviews took place after the participants' data collection had been

completed; they therefore took place across a longer period of time ranging from June 2022-June

2023 (most were completed between June and October; the final interview was rescheduled because

of the participants' extenuating circumstances). They ranged in duration from 52-85 minutes. As

with the first interviews, all took place over Zoom and were recorded using Zoom's record-to-Cloud

feature. I took notes by hand which I typed up and then destroyed, once again expanding on the

typed notes and recording the file names of posts we discussed in the interview. I also recorded any

relevant reflections about my experience of the interview, sometimes focusing on follow-up I

needed to remember, and sometimes reflecting on my emotional experience per the commitment

outlined above to consider my positionality as researcher. I once again downloaded the audio-only

file of the Zoom recording and the automated transcription; I then submitted eleven to Rev for

professional transcription and completed two transcriptions myself using Otter.ai, once again based

on my available allotment of research funds. I once again corrected proper nouns that had been

incorrectly captured, eliminated references to names, corrected formatting errors, and included

references to other vocalizations as relevant to interpretation.

2.3.7 Member-Checking

My member-checking process served several purposes: to check the accuracy of my

information, to ensure participant approval of direct quotes of their social media posts wherever

possible, and to test the validity of my conclusions. I shared with each participant a private Google

doc of my full draft of the dissertation as of January 27, 2023. I indicated that participants had two

options for review: they could read through the whole document if they liked, or they could use the

search function to track mentions of their pseudonym and therefore locate any quotes or

information linked to that identity. To protect participant identities from disclosure through this

process and avoid, where possible, sharing information that participants had not confirmed or

approved, I included only the participant profile (see below) of the person receiving the document

and removed the profiles of other participants. I invited participants to take time over the following

two weeks to comment on the document where they had concerns, corrections, or other responses,

and–if they chose to do so–schedule a Zoom session with me to debrief those responses. These

conversations and comments resulted in a number of edits, clarifications, and revisions. I asked

participants, when they were satisfied, to submit a Qualtrics form indicating their approval of the

quotes and personal details attributed to their pseudonym. 11 of the 13 writers submitted this form

by the time the dissertation draft was finalized.

2.4 Participant Profiles

I interviewed 13 participants for this study, all of whom were born between 1986 and 1996,

reported being raised in white evangelicalism, were currently living in the United States, and were

users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or some combination of the above during the time period

under consideration. At the outset of this study, I had not yet limited my scope to 2020, so there

were cases in which users were more active in their platform usage and in their "writing back"

between say, 2016-2018, and had tapered off by 2020, but all made some posts on one or more of

these platforms during that time. In this section, I offer a brief profile of each participant, referring

to them by the pseudonyms that they chose or that I chose and the participant approved. I use the

information they provided in their survey in early 2021 to build these profiles, because it is the

information I used to make sampling decisions; in some cases, participants' statuses changed over the course of the data collection period.

Anya (she/her)**,** born in the mid-1990s, described herself as a single, straight, cisgender white and Hispanic woman with a college degree who, at the time of her survey-taking, was working in project management. While she'd lived in Eastern Europe for a time as a small child, she spent the rest of her childhood and adult life in the American South, where she attended Baptist churches and got involved in the College Republicans. She was in college during the election of Donald Trump; that experience, disentanglement from an abusive parent, and her relationships with Muslim friends and other colleagues from around the world all led Anya to a reckoning with her religious identity. In her survey response, she described herself as "Episcopalian, Spiritual" and for a time pursued seminary training in hopes of becoming a spiritual director. She spent most of her time on Twitter, she said, calling it her "home platform" and a place where she interacted with "religious reckoning / reconstruction-type content." But Facebook was "where I go when I have something to say," particularly to the evangelicals she knew as a kid–youth group friends, Bible study teachers, pastors, church volunteers, and other "middle management" types from the churches she grew up in.

Alex (he/him), born in the early 1990s, got married just before our first interview. He's a straight cisgender white man with a bachelor's degree who does tech for his Mid-Atlantic local government not far from the rural area where he grew up. Alex's dad was a minister in a Mennonite congregation, a pacifist tradition, though Alex questioned how convicted the congregants were of that position–tensions over U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan proved an early moment of political awareness for Alex. The conflation of religious conviction and Republicanism was more pronounced in the large nondenominational church he was attending in the early Trump years, one he left in 2020 over their silence on the murder of George Floyd and social media posts the church

made criticizing progressive Christians. He told me he resonates with his Mennonite roots, and specifically their historical convictions about care for the poor, but identifies himself as a Christian "sparingly," aware of the negative history and connotations associated with that word. Alex had an Instagram account and used Reddit to explore progressive theology, but Facebook is where he wrote back to the evangelical communities he belonged to in the past. He mostly made his own posts, he said, and occasionally commented on others' posts. He liked to share things he found meaningful, but not everyone would agree with. The goal–often thwarted–was a real conversation.

Beck (they/them), born in the late 1980s, is white, non-binary, asexual, and in a heterosexual partnership. A musician, they grew up and still live in the Pacific Northwest, starting out in nondenominational churches with a Pentecostal flavor–speaking in tongues was not an uncommon feature of morning worship–and moving toward more "strait-laced" evangelical churches in later childhood. In both interviews and tweets, Beck described encounters with other kinds of Christian groups, non-Christians, and LGBTQ people in their college years and twenties as formative for their slow evolution away from evangelicalism. At the time of our interview, Beck told me they hadn't been to church in two years because of weekend work schedules–"ironically, it's almost like I'm more evangelical in the sense that a lot of my Christian practice is entirely personal," they joked. Beck had left Facebook by 2020; they'd posted negatively about Donald Trump in 2015 and experienced significant ruptures in a lot of relationships with evangelical friends. They were unique among the group in their exclusive use of Twitter, which made them an outlier in matters of rhetorical posture and audience–and described their activity there more in terms of engaging in public discourse than interacting with their social world.

Beth (she/her), born in the late 1980s, is a straight, cisgender white woman in the Southeast who works in marketing. She grew up "in a Christian school more than in a Christian church" and her family fell to the outside of the various kinds of Baptist congregations they attended during her

childhood. Her dad had worked in a non-political role for Bill Clinton and voted for him, which may have influenced that sense of being on the edges, though they swung much more conservative in later years. Beth got a master's degree in a communications field at a large public university, which she credits with developing both a wider perspective, informed by encounters with diverse classmates, and a media literacy that informs her consumption and her writing about current events. She used Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook and posted about her church, her child, her fitness, and outings with local family members, commenting and engaging frequently. "I like to participate," she said. Political thoughts directed to evangelical friends went to Facebook more than Instagram–it felt "easier," more suited to platform affordances, and because Facebook came out when she was attending a Baptist college, she has a lot of evangelical-connected friends on the site. The 2020 election cycle led her to mute and unfollow more than one. In her survey response to a question about her political beliefs, she wrote wryly that "I am considered a 'going to hell liberal,' which to me means politically moderate" before adding, to clarify: "I voted Dem in the last election."

Christy (she/her), born in the early 1990s, grew up in the Northern Rocky Mountain region, but at the time of our interview was concluding her doctoral studies in a Mid-Atlantic state. Christy grew up in a conservative mainline congregation with a female associate pastor; her chaplain dad sometimes preached there. At her Christian college, she encountered devout professors who voted for Democrats; she also began to suspect that "the people talking about abortion" were more concerned about cracking down on premarital sex. A local political candidate who was also a friend from her home church announced his support for a law requiring invasive ultrasounds before a woman could legally obtain an abortion, and Christy remembers scraping his bumper sticker off her car. White, straight, and engaged at the time of our interview, Christy noted that she's often read as queer, which factored into her conversations with other Christians about LGBTQ issues. While active on Twitter as an academic and a leftist, Christy's "writing back" took place on Facebook,

where she remained–until 2020, at least–connected with conservative family members, old classmates, and folks from the group that left her childhood church when the denomination began ordaining gay clergy. Her immediate family regularly talks politics–but for some of their extended family members, Christy's social media posts were a bridge too far.

Felix (he/him), born in the early 1990s, is a single, cisgender, white man who lives in the Great Lakes region and puts his master's degree to use as a librarian. He grew up with Republican parents in a church where that affiliation was assumed–like Alex, he remembers widespread support for U.S. military actions in Iraq as an early point of dissonance: "how 'pro-life' is a war that doesn't need to happen?" Close friends from his home church reacted reasonably well when he came out as gay, but he eventually concluded he couldn't be part of a denomination that financially supported anti-LGBTQ evangelical organizations like Focus on the Family. He found his way to Episcopalianism in the early 2010s and spent a year blogging his way through a reading of the entire Bible; during the first Trump campaign, he had "plenty to say about that" on Facebook. By 2020, Felix posted rarely, and his distance from his evangelical roots meant that few of these posts directly targeted that audience; his most direct critique of church at this time targeted white supremacy in the legacy of the American Episcopal tradition. He emailed to ask if he could delete his Facebook while enrolled in the study and did so when I confirmed it would have no impact on my research.

Gabe (he/him), born in the early 1990s, was a straight, cisgender white man, married, and a parent. He grew up in the Southwest, where he still lived at the time of the interview, in "the cultural glob of evangelicalism rather than a specific faith tradition"–which in that area meant Awana, a Baptist scouts program, Christian children's media, homeschooling, and K-16 Christian education. He paid the bills working in sales, but during 2020, the period in which I collected his social media activity and which we discussed, he was enrolled in a training program to be recommended for ordination in what was technically his Wesleyan home denomination, a process that had stalled

abruptly just before our first interview because of his affirming views on LGBTQ inclusion in the church. This wasn't unexpected–Gabe had seen other progressive candidates boxed out over their views–but disheartening, nonetheless. His preparation had included pastoring a small house church and working in other ministry positions with youth. Gabe was one of the most active social media users; he was on "Weird Christian Twitter," had an Instagram account, and used Facebook, and it wasn't unusual for him to post multiple times in a day–though he, too, was placing more and more guardrails around his use of social media, limiting interaction to folks he knew personally and could trust to respond in good faith. Arguing with other pastors online had been particularly damaging, especially seeing them celebrate policies he felt were deeply antithetical to the way of Jesus.

Ivy (she/her), born in the early 1990s, a bisexual white Latina woman living with her heterosexual partner on the East Coast, was a pastor's kid in a Pentecostal denomination, though she went to Catholic schools in her predominantly Irish New England hometown. Ivy had been heavily involved in music and worship from an early age, and after high school participated in a ministry training program that put on well-known evangelistic events for young people. She came home burned out and questioning her faith, only to feel pressured, misled, and used by adults at her home church who wanted her to volunteer for ministry again. Shortly thereafter, the 2016 election prompted Ivy to reevaluate a lot of what she'd heard growing up in evangelical communities about subjects like poverty, welfare, Islam, and homosexuality. Facebook was part of her journey–seeing folks online challenge other people about what it really means to be pro-life when it comes to social programs that support children and families, for example, shifted her thinking. She posted frequently, sometimes more than once a day, during the study period, and it wasn't unusual for her to have long comment threads going back and forth with old friends from church. Ivy also spoke more extensively about "deconstruction," a term and hashtag popularly used to describe a process of

questioning (evangelical) faith, than other participants. She described her emerging approach to faith as one of curiosity and honesty, focused on caring for others without the pressure to convert them.

Jordan (they/them), born in the late 1980s, is multiracial, non-binary, and queer, from the Southwest but living in the Great Lakes region. Jordan grew up in the Methodist-Wesleyan theological family, homeschooled with a Christian Reconstructionist curriculum, which they remember as very "pro-confederate" and advocating a kind of theocratic rule; prominent thinkers in the movement have also advocated the death penalty for gay people. Church was a major social outlet, and Jordan was a bit nerdy about faith. They also got heavily into C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and found a Yahoo Group for Christian fantasy fans run by a bunch of Wheaton College grads–more "mainstream" evangelicals than the Reconstructionist thread. As an older teenager and college student, Jordan threw themself into historical study of the Bible and in particular its teaching about gender and sexuality, a pursuit that carried them through work at a major evangelical media outlet and a Christian college–and then got them fired. After a few years at a liberal seminary, a season where they got into lots of arguments on Facebook about Trump and Black Lives Matter, Jordan reevaluated their approach to social media–they backed way off Facebook and deleted "a lot of my old pugilistic anti-Trump posts." In 2020 they began to re-engage, specifically because "for a lot of people I might be one of the only people they've ever heard of who identifies as non-binary," and they wanted to share posts that might "make an impact on people that I know in how they think about trans people." At the time of our conversation, Jordan was virtually attending an affirming mainline congregation and a synagogue's Torah study. They also continued to work professionally as a writer.

Kelly (she/her), a white woman born in the early 1990s, moved a lot as a missionary kid, which led to a number of ecumenical and cross-cultural experiences–they were Protestant, but what kind depended on the church options available. Most of her teen years were spent in the Middle

East, heavily influenced by more fundamentalist friends from the English-speaking church who activated and encouraged her family's prior engagement with Vision Forum ministries, which advocated things like homeschooling, large families (the "Quiverfull movement," made famous by the reality television show about the Duggar Family's 19+ children), and "stay-at-home daughters." For Kelly, her youthful convictions meant that she didn't go to college and got married quite young; at the time of our conversations, she was homeschooling her kids and her husband was a pastor in their large Mid-Atlantic city. She was troubled by things like the Sandy Hook shooting and Republican resistance to regulations on GMOs, and the move to a major city challenged old ideas of what families should look like; her dissonance with her childhood beliefs came into focus around the 2016 election and what Kelly viewed as an astonishing "lack of compassion" from Republican officials toward immigrants and refugees from the Middle East. "I just felt like–well, their policies aren't pro-life, even if technically they are." Because of her many moves, international and domestic, Kelly had a collage of friends and viewpoints represented on her Instagram and Facebook feeds; she spent more time on Instagram and told me she was likelier to share things to her stories–which, unfortunately, I couldn't access retrospectively–than to post. When she did post, it was often the same content to both Facebook and Instagram, and she told me she also went to Facebook when she wanted to "write something that's from me" about current events. She worried about hurting people or folks writing her off because she said something too liberal– "that's usually the priority I try to have… what will not shut further conversation down?"

Olivia (she/her), a straight woman born in the late 1980s, grew up a mixed-race kid in the Baptist Southeast–her mom is Chinese-American, and her dad is white. Their family life was isolated, so Olivia threw herself into church–mission trips, praise band, youth choir, volunteering. After high school, she pursued ministry training at a Bible college in the Midwest. But her presence was constantly questioned. While she was a student, the president instituted a ban on books that

affirmed egalitarianism and women's leadership; Olivia's professor was disciplined for assigning one. "What I was experiencing from the people who would one day be leading churches, was not what I felt like future pastors and leaders of the Evangelical American church should be saying or how they should be treating people," she told me. When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, Olivia's roommates were distraught. She didn't tell them she'd voted for him. Olivia married another student, a worship pastor, and they moved into the world of Midwestern megachurches; Olivia wrote devotionals, led worship, preached, and blogged, which gave her a small taste of social media fame–folks in the church felt they knew her, and had expectations, because of her profile in the community and online. While she's put much firmer boundaries over who has access to her accounts separating her professional work in communications, her speaking, and her personal life, Olivia's reflective writing on Instagram and Facebook still sometimes evoked strong feedback from church members. She wrestled with those expectations and posted a lot about integrity as a parent, a Christian, and a leader, guided by the firm belief that who you are behind closed doors is who you are.

Tim (he/him), born in the late 1980s, is a single, straight, cisgender white man who grew up in the Midwest in Wesleyan congregations he described as "your standard evangelical thing"–VBS, Sunday school, the occasional revival. He grew up listening to James Dobson on the radio, and remembered lots of discussion about abortion–mostly, though, Tim describes his childhood Christianity as very real, with a sense of alignment between his young faith and how his family lived. In college, he encountered other Christian traditions that challenged his theological assumptions; as a young professional, he ended up at a church that turned out to be Baptist, though he didn't know that when he joined. He experienced growing dissonance with that community as he came to an affirming position on LGBTQ issues; in 2020, he left the church over their silence on Black Lives Matter and joined a more progressive mainline denomination, the closest thing he could find locally

to an intersection between what was beloved of his childhood tradition and "what I believe about how we should love people." Online, he was mostly a "consumer," lurking on Twitter and reading content from more progressive Christian outlets; on Facebook, where he posted most, Tim had gone through "a variety of stages of trying to interact and talk with people," focused on the hope that his evangelical friends in particular might "recognize maybe the ways in which they are not loving people well." He was not a particularly frequent poster–when he did share, it was news, anti-racism content, and occasionally book excerpts– and told me in our 2021 interview that he'd pulled back.

      Tyler (he/him), born in the mid-1990s, spent his high school years on the West Coast fervently engaged with what was at the time a very popular strain of Reformed theology advanced by platforms like The Gospel Coalition and Desiring God–the "rigid structure" felt more serious than the large evangelical church his parents attended. He described himself as white, Hispanic, straight, and cisgender, and during 2020 lived in a major East Coast city to which he'd moved with a Christian internship program. Tyler said he wasn't sure that, as a high school student, he would have said Democrats could be Christians–abortion and gay marriage seemed like defining issues–but at the time of our interview, he and his girlfriend were looking for an LGBTQ affirming church, which felt like a "completely different approach" to faith than how they were both raised. He remembers unfollowing conservative pastor John Piper on Twitter in 2019 as a defining moment and cited the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests as a tipping point in his understanding of what "the church needed to be for." Disentangling from that childhood and young adult framework had left Tyler with a lot of open questions about what he wanted from church and what he believed about Christian life. Twitter was a core platform for learning. Tyler had an Instagram account where he posted infrequently; he'd also just deleted his Facebook account–though he called it "lapsed medium" for him since around 2018–when we spoke for the first time. Of the participants, he was both the

youngest and the most openly skeptical about social media, its incentives, and the companies managing major platforms.

2.5 Data Analysis

As this chapter's positionality statements indicated, I came to the data with robust lived experience and observation in the world of white evangelicalism and its social media discourse as well as theories about the nature of digital writing from reading the available literature. My data analysis was, as with many qualitative research projects, somewhat recursive, and made liberal use of many features of my interdisciplinary training, including grounded theory, digital ethnography, and rhetorical close reading.

Grounded theory, as elaborated by Clarke and Charmaz, is an iterative process, involving both cycles of collection, analysis, and verification to make comparisons and "develop theoretical understandings of puzzling findings," it is furthermore marked by sustained interaction with data. I could hardly help sustained interaction with data; the labor-intensive process of screenshotting and logging relevant social media posts itself immersed me in what was, in some cases, a very robust record of the daily life of a particular research participant. Furthermore, the time required to screenshot and schedule interviews meant that I was "tacking back and forth" not only between data collection and preliminary analysis, but also between methods of data collection, which cross-pollinated and supported the development of theoretical categories including raised-evangelical, writing back, witness, and networks (Clarke & Charmaz, n.p.) As I immersed myself in the data, my own understanding of raised-evangelicals as a cohort, writing back as a project, and the focus of the project sharpened. As recounted above, during the course of data collection I narrowed the time period under consideration, elected to focus on each participant's primary social media platform for "writing back," and developed a stronger sense of what, precisely, it was I was looking for in the

posts that I collected and what distinguished "writing back" from other rhetorical activity on the participants' social media accounts (See "Data Collection: Social Media Observation).

In my prospectus study design, I had planned to deploy an inductive coding approach and to code all the posts and the interviews in NVivo for rhetorical patterns, audience management strategies, and ethical frameworks. I pursued this for a time, developing some familiarity with the software and workshopping potential codes based on my knowledge of the data. However, the social media observations revealed several limitations to this approach. First, because of the nature of the data, which included a wide variety of file types–some screenshots, some screen recordings, some documents–systematic coding within the software proved challenging. While possible, it would have redirected a significant amount of my time to learning and troubleshooting the intricacies of NVivo, which I judged better spent on the data. Second and more theoretically significant, my observations revealed the difficulty of isolating writing back from other types of rhetorical activity. In particular, the construct involves an element of risk–saying something that might not be well-received by an audience inside white evangelicalism–and what constituted risk depended very much on the positionality and context of the writer. Faced with these challenges, I shifted to an ethnographic approach that better aligned with the affordances of my data and supported the emerging focus of the project, which attended less to specific rhetorical moves or linguistic patterns and more on how participants conceptualized their social media writing and configured their religious identities online. I did, however, use NVivo to conduct word frequency queries referenced in Chapter 3 as I explored participant definitions of white evangelicalism, and I made liberal use of the search functions within Google Drive to locate repeated instances of similar language, for example.

"Ethnography" has traditionally referred to in-person fieldwork, wherein the researcher conducts fieldwork by co-locating, and often participating in the daily lives, of participants.

Ethnographic work involving "reading at a distance" has been referred to as "remote" ethnography, and–increasingly–digital ethnography, referring both to "deploying the ethnographic to understand digital culture" and the use of digital tools for ethnographic research (Hjorth et al., p. 2) Digital ethnography is a particularly appropriate tool for this study because of an assumption the study design shares: our "real" and digital lives are now so entwined as to be impossible to disentangle. My methods–of both observing social media activity and speaking, live, to the practitioners about their writing, reflects this assumption; no one account could address the questions of this study on its own. My data collection moved between observation and interview among participants–e.g., I might collect social media writing from one participant, schedule and interview, and in the meantime begin collecting from another–but because of the two interview design, I also moved between both for each individual participant: while I followed my semi-structured interview protocol relatively closely in initial interviews, the second interviews afforded me both a chance to collect data and to verify my interpretations. These second interviews centered on two or more specific posts I'd pulled to ask about in detail, but I also spent time with each participant raising questions about patterns I had noticed in their writing, or across the interviews. For example, this exchange with Tim:

> KVZ: So as I mentioned a little bit here, that you often share stuff without commentary, at least in this period of time. So there are a few posts from Ibram X. Kendi on inauguration day. And I think on the day of the insurrection you shared a YouTube video of a Porter's Gate song at one point. And then this news article, of course. And I'm curious about that sort of sharing something without commentary and that pattern. What can you tell me about that?

> Tim: I don't know. I feel like sometimes when sharing stuff like that, I mean, I guess there's a degree to which it, like, adds that personal element. But I feel like there's also a degree, to

me, where it feels like ego to suppose that if you're sharing content, because you feel like

someone said it well, then to suppose that you can say it better is, I don't know.

These conversations often further raised information about the imbrication of digital life with the

participants' real-life interactions. A question about one of Christy's most persistent commenters

surfaced extended backstory about the context of the relationship, and also how her awareness of

their shared history– "the religion we grew up with" at the church both attended–and how he

handled offline political conversations informed what she chose to push back on, and what she

chose to let slide. Comments like these only underscored the relevance of interview data for

effectively interpreting social media writing, and audience management in particular. For that reason

I likewise toggle between data from posts and interview comments in my presentation of the

findings and–particularly in Chapter 3–make robust use of survey data to ground and verify my

analysis.

Rhetorical close readings of specific posts, often including direct commentary about those

posts sourced from my interview data, also comprise a significant part of my analytical work in this

project. "Zooming in" on participant writing in this way enabled me to test and nuance my

understanding of the broad patterns in the data and make close comparisons between both the

content and strategy of different writers in the dataset. Those comparisons, a mainstay of grounded

theory work, clarified distinctions and illuminated the influence of factors like social identities, family

relationships, and local context that differentiated one writer from another; they furthermore

enabled me to evidence and explicate those strategies or practices exhibited by multiple participants.

While in-text analysis of social media posts appears throughout Chapters 4-6, they appear in some

places as profiles, selected and called out for specific attention because of their length or their

usefulness to elucidate a pattern about which the chapter makes an argument. Early drafts of "Kelly:

Amplifying Alternative Perspectives" (Chapter 5) and "Olivia: An SEO Professional on Algorithms"

(Chapter 4) emerged from memo-ing exercises that were essential to building the theory that now animates their chapters. The profiles also contextualize their rhetorical close reading with discussion of the patterns of that writers' work and comments they made in interviews–about the post, or about their social media writing more broadly–leveraging ethnographic data to better understand the nuances of their rhetorical work. This methodological toolkit enabled both careful attention to specific rhetorical activities and contexts, but also showcased the rich description afforded by my ethnographic observations and interviews. (Privacy limitations on lengthy quotes from participant writing further pushed me toward artful paraphrase.)

Taken together, grounded theory, digital ethnography, and rhetorical close reading enabled me to build a substantive link between the writing my participants did on social media and the larger question of their religious identities, and to extrapolate from that link arguments about the nature of those religious identities in the digital age. Intensive examination of individual writers and particular posts has its limits as a method, which I will address below. However, I follow Robert Donmeyer here in arguing that small studies like this one can contribute to the literature by elucidating generative questions about the population and activity the study addresses. My identification of interesting patterns and rich description of the writers' writing and thinking contribute to the field's greater understanding of the theoretical categories this study fleshes out and the new questions made possible by their articulation.

2.6 Research Ethics

Social media research has opened uniquely thorny questions about research ethics (franzke et al.). Approaches foregrounding care have emerged, particularly among explicitly feminist and anti-racist digital scholars, to address the insufficiency of Institutional Review Board regulations for safeguarding the privacy and confidentiality of research participants. While much social media

writing is considered "public" and "textual," these scholars foreground that online data is human subject research and the writers' consent to publish it online does not automatically extend to a consent for its inclusion in a study (e.g., McDuffie & Ames). My study addresses writing that participants shared in fora ranging from public Twitter accounts to private Facebook and Instagram feeds; I am working at a small enough scale–thirteen interview participants–that robust informed consent and member-checking was both feasible and appropriate.

In keeping with both my Institutional Review Board research ethics standards and these ethics of care, I have chosen to give my participants the maximum possible control over how they are represented in this dissertation. I did so in several ways. Participants chose or approved a pseudonym that I selected. In the member-checking process, I extended to each participant an invitation to approve or provide edits to their participant profile–the most concentrated site of detailed information, including demographic information–and to approve direct quotes and references to them. This member-checking supported the validity of the research, but also ensured that participants had on-going and concrete opportunities to extend or withdraw the informed consent obtained from each at the outset of their survey participation and their interview participation. Wherever possible, I quoted from posts that were protected by participants' own privacy settings; in the few cases in which I directly addressed a post that was public, I relied heavily on description and refrained from quoting long or distinctive phrases that might be identifiable in a search conducted on the relevant platform. Through participant accounts I furthermore had access to writing from people who did not consent to participate in the study; I never quoted directly from comments and described their content only in general terms. I have, however, chosen to lightly edit interview quotations to remove false starts and vocal pauses where these did not affect the meaning of the utterance in order to eliminate distractions for the reader. To maintain confidentiality, I approved my data storage and management plans with the Institutional Review Board, using best

practices for secure storage and pseudonyms in interview transcripts, my file dictionary, and file names.

This project, like any human subjects research, would not be possible without the willing participation of the writers whose data I analyze here. In light of the trust which participants have placed in me, I have chosen to approach participant writing and statements with sentiments I draw from my community engagement training, including asset-based analysis, and my training in literary studies, among them reparative reading. That is to say, I do not rely on ideological critique as a method of analysis, but instead seek to faithfully describe what participants say and do; I furthermore choose to trust that participants have, insofar as possible, expressed themselves honestly, and their motivations and interests are what they say they are. As a rhetorician I consider the strategic invocations of values like civil dialogue, unity, or inclusion, but I assume in this project that these are pre-existing values and sincerely held. In recognition of the trust placed in me by participants and feminist principles of reciprocity, I furthermore made small self-disclosures to participants, some of whom wanted to know–even at the stage of survey promotion on Twitter– what my stakes were in the questions of this dissertation.[21] I also sought to communicate honest sympathy and concern where participants' own disclosures warranted that kind of human connection.

2.6.1 Positionality (Reprise)

In this project, I study writers with whom I share a host of characteristics. My social networks in the broader evangelical world were essential to recruiting for this study; I used my

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[21] Because of my public writing (e.g., on my college alumni blog), the necessity of adding Facebook users to my personal account, and digital traces of my affiliations and work, participants had access to online information that illuminated my own political and religious views and affiliations; however, I refer here primarily to indications in interviews that yes, I knew or recognized the program or person to whom they were referring.

ambient knowledge about American Christianity, church history, evangelical media and culture, and its tensions to interpret participants' references, in posts and in interviews, to features of evangelical life from the denominations they grew up in and the famous pastors or writers they engaged with to the controversies they referenced or wrote about. For example: I relied on my own experience of Mennonites–those I knew as family friends and those I met through a service-learning program run by Mennonite Central Committee in 2014-2015–when analyzing writing and interview comments from Alex, who grew up in that tradition, about the tensions he felt with childhood church friends who embraced consumer capitalism and the second amendment.

While my lived experience in and around white evangelicalism was a useful tool in this way, I also encountered its limits. There were failures of knowledge–participants might mention a formative figure or organization with which I was unfamiliar–which were a useful reminder that others' experiences differed from my own. More profoundly, while racism and queerphobia were not explicit focuses of this dissertation, they haunted much of the writing participants did. White evangelicalism and rhetorical engagement with white evangelicals is safer for me than for some of my participants; it is safer for some participants than others. It was in part for this reason that I defined writing back in terms of what constituted a risky statement for the participant in question; an ethnographic approach to participant writing helped me to address and acknowledge what was at stake for them personally in their engagements on social media.

I maintained robust practices of reflection to examine my reactions to participants' stories and examine and mitigate the way that my own identities and my more privileged experience in American Christianity might color my analysis. This reflection took many forms: I memo-ed about my interview notes and my evolving thinking in a dissertation journal, particularly during the data collection phase. I also regularly shared my writing with my writing group, one with diverse social identities and experiences of American religion, to help me check assumptions I might be making in

my descriptions and analysis. My committee members also provided feedback. Finally, my own literacy practices expanded my thinking. It remained my practice and commitment while writing this dissertation to read memoirs that addressed white evangelicalism from locations that were not my own, including *All My Knotted-Up Life* by Beth Moore, *Shoutin' In the Fire: An American Epistle* by Danté Stewart, and *Unfollow* by Megan Phelps-Roper. When I wrote on my own social media accounts about contentious political events, I walked through again the emotions my participants' reported in their interviews with me. All these processes supported my on-going reflection and self-critique.

2.6.2 Generalizability

To facilitate generalizability, I conducted cognitive interviews about my survey instrument with four pilot study participants representing diverse geographies, ages, genders, sexualities, and communities of origin and refined the survey to be easily understood and accessible to a wide audience. The diversity of age, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, relationship and parenthood status, education level, denominational background, geographic ties, and professional lives represented in my survey data, and subsequently in my interview pool, provide a strong basis for confidence that the claims made in this dissertation reflect the demographic range of raised-evangelicals. The range of views on evangelicalism, the diversity in then-current religious affiliations and practices, platforms used, posting frequency, and political views expounded furthermore suggest that this study faithfully captures variation among the beliefs and practices–about God, church, and the internet–of social media writers "writing back" on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, during long 2020. This study's design further facilitated pattern analysis across multiple data types; the interview comments added depth and nuance to my analysis of social media writing itself, the posts refined and grounded my questions for interviews, and survey data provided wider context for the

patterns discussed particularly in Chapter 3. While I cannot claim that the findings of this dissertation reflect all such writers' experiences, I worked to ensure faithful representation of the data and robust engagement with relevant scholars across disciplines to inform my conclusions. Generalizing insights beyond these platforms and this sample would require further research. Raised-evangelicals who no longer identify as Christian may exhibit substantially different patterns of engagement with white evangelical audiences. This study furthermore cannot speak with authority on the specific dynamics of this kind of social media writing for raised-evangelicals of color. While several of the interviewees identified as people of color, more targeted research on their experiences and rhetorical activity is sorely needed. The patterns and practices explored in Chapters 4 and 5 may productively reflect the experiences of more liberal members of non-evangelical but similarly conservative families, perhaps particularly those grounded in other religious traditions, but further research would be required to confirm this hypothesis.

2.6.3 Limitations

This study is limited by its sample; it did not include the experiences of older American millennials born before 1986, and because of IP address restrictions, it also did not include the experiences of those American raised-evangelicals who now reside outside of the United States. During survey promotion, both these age and geographic cutoffs received some comment from social media users, who joked that nobody cares about Gen X, or commented that they could not access the survey because they live abroad. These comments themselves suggest that there are raised-evangelicals outside my study parameters who identified with the term "writing back" and were eager to participate in research on the subject.

This study is further limited by platform and modality; my focus here remains on people writing under their real names to people they know, or with the understanding that those known

parties might "overhear." I cannot extrapolate these conclusions to participants who primarily use other forms of social media, perhaps particularly video-based platforms like TikTok or Instagram Reels, both avenues with robust communities of people processing their evangelical childhoods, or more anonymous platforms like Reddit. One significant challenge to this project, as with any social media research, is that the platforms in question change quickly. During the course of the writing process Elon Musk bought and made dramatic changes to the platform I refer to in this study as Twitter, but is now known as X. The further rise of TikTok and the shift on Instagram to video consumption over posting to feed and the introduction of ChatGPT, regular updates to Facebook and Instagram's algorithms, among other developments, all mean that the internet as we experience it in 2024 is markedly different than the one I write about in this dissertation.

Finally, the study is limited to claims made about a specific period in time. America's political and religious landscape is also undergoing mutation; the country emerges from a pandemic only to face another presidential election defined by the dysfunction of our government. This study can only provide a snapshot of a volatile and tense period of American life, one whose impacts on our institutions and imaginations are still in many ways opaque to us. Furthermore, I studied this period retrospectively and asked participants to speak about their memory of online interactions from, in some cases, almost three years in the past. While many of these posts were instances of heightened emotion that the participants recalled very clearly, I am nonetheless restrained by the fallibility of human memory in the conclusions I can draw from those accounts.

2.7 Conclusion

In my study design, I attended to opportunities for original contribution to the methodological approaches used to investigate social media writing, religious rhetorics, and American religious and political identity, particularly the underleveraged approach of speaking

directly to writers and studying decision-making across a range of platforms. While I designed this study to research rhetorical patterns in the writing of raised evangelicals, to understand how they talk about the ethical dimensions of their choices, and to consider how they negotiate responses, the dissertation this project ultimately produced revolves around a more abstract question: how do raised-evangelicals use social media writing to reconfigure their religious identities? In the chapters that follow, I investigate these questions and the relationship between them, focusing first on how raised-evangelicals defined white evangelicalism, how they conceptualized their social media activity, and how they leveraged their online writing to build trust that could withstand their critiques. Finally, I turn in the conclusion to the implications of this scholarship and propose a new, network-based way of framing religious identity for these post-evangelical Americans. In all of these efforts, I foreground the meaning-making of my participants: what they told me and what they wrote online.

Chapter 3 What Does (White) Evangelicalism Mean to You?

3.1 Introduction

"Yeah, in some ways it feels like a hard question to answer–like, there's so much loaded there… It also probably depends on how much work you've done to understand the culture that you grew up in. I think, like, 5 or 10 years ago that question might have been confusing to me. I had never thought of myself as being white evangelical; I just felt like it was just Christian, you know?"

–pilot study participant, fall 2021

In an anecdote from her research recruitment, Emily Cope Murphy describes a participant's reluctance to use the term "evangelical" because of a resistance to labels and a desire to distance herself from the connotations of the term in public discourse. Murphy reassures the participant that she, the researcher, is using "evangelical in a particular, scholarly sense," an attempt to separate the political connotations of the term from its theological definitions–e.g., the Bebbington quadrilateral addressed in this dissertation's introduction (Murphy & Ringer 116[22]). But the connotations the participant resisted, as well as the National Association of Evangelical's self-conscious assertion that theological distinctives rather than "political, social, or cultural trends" mark true evangelicalism, belie the term's associations in America's culture wars and in particular with evangelicals as a reliably Republican voting bloc. And both further evoke the problem at the center of the scholarly debates reviewed in this dissertation's introduction: change over time. Things have definitely changed–but is it the nature of evangelicalism that is now altered, or our understanding of it? And who is "us"?

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[22] In *Mapping Christian Rhetorics,* Emily Cope Murphy and Jeffrey M. Ringer describe their attempts to study evangelicals by relying on the self-identification of research participants or defining a participant as evangelical because of their connection to a professedly evangelical definition, but note the limitations of both these approaches. For more on my own decision to use self-identification in sampling, see Chapter 2.

In the introduction, I addressed debates among scholars about evangelicalism as an historical, theological, political, and cultural movement, focusing on Benedict Anderson's framework of imagined community and Kristin Kobes Du Mez's extension, which defines evangelicalism in terms of a culture of media consumption; I spoke briefly also about the descriptor "white," which rhetors use primarily to emphasize the racial politics, rather than the demographics, of evangelicalism in America. Here, I follow the charge offered by Murphy and Ringer in *Mapping Christian Rhetorics* that "research with 'ordinary' people might complement and challenge terms that have become fossilized within public and academic spheres" (120-121). Because I am a scholar of rhetoric, I am most interested in how people use the label, rather than what, precisely, it means; as a qualitative researcher, I am further invested in how participants view the term and describe themselves. I review data from the study about what study participants took the term to mean, and what they used the term to do. In this chapter I explore participant definitions of white evangelicalism, using "impressionable years" and the contact hypothesis as explanatory frames for their critiques of the movement and their framing of its development. I argue that for writers in this study's target demographic, the question of definition is a question of memory. To answer it, they must tell a story about both the movement's past and present and about their own.

For many of them, the story is one of growing distance; while abuse of power emerges as a leading critique of white evangelicalism, they point to its idiosyncrasies, too, which both ground the critique in specifics and right-size–or minimize–white evangelicalism's power to determine the shape of their futures, the capital-C Church's future, and America's. I make this case using survey responses, before turning to the narratives of change presented in participants' interview comments to make sense of those critiques. I also review the religious backgrounds of my survey participants, which offer further evidence that respondents use "white evangelicalism" to describe the political and media culture of their childhood communities, rather than a unified theology. Following the

work of Tisa Wenger, I suggest that people not only adopt the concept of religion but also claim categories within it because the category affords them certain advantages at a particular moment. In this case, the terminology of white evangelicalism offers a useful shorthand to name the world of their childhood and their adult distance from it.

3.2 A Mediated Relationship with the Past

Nostalgia for a better time has long been associated with conservative political factions, who seek to preserve or return to a more rightly ordered past–"Make America Great Again," Donald Trump's famed 2016 campaign slogan, is only one such manifestation. But scholars of social media increasingly emphasize that our relationship with the past, and therefore the stories we tell about what has changed and how, are mediated by our experiences on the internet. For long-time users of Facebook and Instagram, more than a decade of their lives are recorded on those platforms, which have leaned into memory-making with features like Facebook's "On This Day" (launched 2015, later relaunched as "Memories") resurfacing your past social media activity on a given date and encouraging users to re-post and interact again around that content (Jungselius & Weilenmann). It's easy to track down acquaintances from the past with a Google search–even if they've got a private Instagram account, they're probably on LinkedIn. Our cultural memory is remade by broader digital features like searchable databases, photo storage software's themed memory collections and years in review, and ready access to media produced long ago via avenues like YouTube's cache of old commercials and streaming services platforming decades-old movies and films. In many ways, the past is more available to us than ever before. And that available past provides both evidence and complications for anyone trying to tell a coherent story about who they are, where they come from, and what's changed.

Respondents to this study's survey all identify as having been raised in white evangelicalism, which almost certainly means that they have family and friends still embedded in the evangelical subculture, even if they have left it behind. Evangelicalism remains part of the "defining conversation" of many of their most intimate relationships, to cite the introduction to this dissertation. For both the broad swath of survey respondents and the narrower group of interviewees, institutional and cultural critiques and their potential actualization were worked out in the context of these relationships, their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram feeds serving as a kind of contact zone in which the critic encounters and decides how to engage the beliefs and affiliations of their friends and family. The decision to write about one's critique of homophobia, Islamophobia, misogyny, and white supremacy in white American evangelical spaces also carries questions like, "how could I tell my parents that the institution to which they gave their whole career is irredeemable?" "How do I live with myself if I assert that what I come from is evil?" And, for many, "how do I contend with the fact that"—in the words of one participant—"it was real to me," or reconcile what it is now with what I remember? For these respondents, defining white evangelicalism evokes questions of family and memory, as well as politics. As one participant said, bewildered by his evangelical network's support for Trump, "my experience has been that, I grew up with people who were very devout and very serious" about their faith.

Scholarship that attempts primarily to make a claim for what evangelicalism or white evangelicalism is often misses the way these fraught interpersonal dynamics shape what participants use those terms to signal, and to whom. Participants who were motivated to respond to a survey about "writing back" to their home communities are, of course, more likely to have an oppositional relationship with that religious community than those who do not describe any of their social media activity in those terms, so the sample overrepresented raised-evangelicals with critical views of

contemporary evangelicalism.[23] In this section, I turn to explicit definitions offered by my 13 interview participants alongside data from their social media writing and interviews with me. I also use the wider dataset of survey responses to deepen arguments not only about how millennial raised-evangelicals define the term, but also how describing their childhoods in terms of white evangelicalism operates as a shorthand for these social media writers, useful for naming the nexus of Christianity and conservative politics in a wide range of religious institutions. Their varying, and multiple, definitions of evangelicalism could be invoked to an equal variety of rhetorical ends–where the assertion that the movement and its institutions are irredeemable lends itself to writing back in the form of prophetic critique, for example, invoking the idea of a good people misled opens other rhetorical possibilities.

3.3 How Participants Defined White Evangelicalism

3.3.1 White Evangelicalism is Associated with (Abuse of) Power

It is perhaps unsurprising that the most generous definition provided by an interview participant used the phrase "well-meaning"; definitions indicated particular skepticism of how the movement enacted its goals. The first headline of my analysis is this: among the raised-evangelicals represented in my study–both survey-only and interview participants–white evangelicalism is profoundly associated with the pursuit of political power. Word frequency analysis offers one rough measure of this sentiment. My survey data includes responses to the question: "In a sentence or two, what does "white evangelicalism" mean to you?" Of the 1037 survey responses logged by Qualtrics in the defined date range, 304 counted as "complete," yielding 258 written responses to this specific question.

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[23] For more details on the survey recruitment materials, please see Appendix A.

Using NVivo, I ran a stemmed word frequency query three times on increasingly specified members of the larger survey respondent pool. First, I analyzed all 258 available responses; this group mirrored eligible interviewees except for the criteria that they remain Christian in some capacity–so all these responses came from people who reported that they were born in the years 1986-1996, were raised in white evangelicalism, and currently living in the United States, but they may or may not identify as Christian today. (For further delineation of how I determined study eligibility from survey responses, please see Chapter 2.) Among that wider group, a stemmed word frequency query analyzing definitions produced the following rankings of words: after the words white*, evangel*, and Christian*, the next most common term was politics (politics, political, politically). The top ten words further included culture, people, belief, conservative, power, and church. Among study-eligible participants–those who indicated, or at least did not preclude the possibility of, continued identification as Christian, were active social media users, and indicated that they viewed some of their activity as "writing back," a group including 87 responses to this question–the top ten words were white, Christian, evangelicalism, politics, culture, people, church, conservative, means, nationalism.

Table 1: Frequency of stemmed words of participant responses to the question, "what does white evangelicalism mean to you?"

	All 258 Responses	All Study-Eligible Responses
Most Frequent Stemmed Words	1. White 2. Evangelical 3. Christian 4. Politics 5. Culture 6. People 7. Belief 8. Conservative 9. Power 10. Church	1. White 2. Christian 3. Evangelical 4. Politics 5. Culture 6. People 7. Church 8. Conservative 9. Means 10. Nationalism

Most Frequent Stemmed Words excluding white, evangelical, and Christian	1. Politics 2. Culture 3. People 4. Belief 5. Conservative 6. Power 7. Church	1. Politics 2. Culture 3. People 4. Church 5. Conservative 6. Means 7. Nationalism

Excluding words used in the definition that were used in the question–"white" and evangelical"–as well as the word "Christian," which does not offer significant information about how participants view white evangelicalism, these responses reinforce the growing scholarly understanding that white evangelicalism is a political movement and perhaps more a political movement than a religious one. The top seven words among both the wider and narrower group feature more language associated with politics–conservative and power for the former, and conservative and nationalism for the latter–than words associated with religiosity–church and belief, for the former, and just "church" among those who maintain religious identification. As religious identification becomes more certain, this pattern does not shift. For the thirteen study participants, whose ongoing identification as Christian was confirmed in interviews, the top ten words were white, Christian, political, evangelicalism, Bible, need, believe, church, concerned, and conservative. The very small pool of responses queried makes this group more idiosyncratic, as indicated by its divergence from the larger pools and inclusion of more verbs; however, it was the only group in which the frequency of words from the root "politics" outweighed the frequency of those from the word "evangelicalism."

Overlapping with the theme of corruption, interviewees invoked power, its pursuit, and its abuse as key markers of white evangelicalism. This emerged through explicit mentions of wealth and political jockeying, but also through more subtle cues: Tim wrote that this group "*insist* on literal interpretations of the Bible" (emphasis mine). Kelly wrote of "mainstream white churches that are Bible believing but now probably also ultra-conservative and maybe Bible-thumping," indicating not

only a sense that white evangelicalism uses the Bible as a weapon, but also that a rightward shift feels, to her, quite recent. Tyler describes this as "an environment of legalism, celebrity pastors, social ignorance, and prosperity gospel tactics," arguing that these strategies in particular "promote personal wealth and comfort over the needs/lives of others." Felix further emphasized abusive tactics, defining white evangelicalism as a "religious and political stance that seems mainly concerned with getting Republicans elected as a way to punish various disliked outgroups." These critiques of religious establishments–and those participants made more publicly in their social media writing– draw on prophetic language from the Christian tradition, particularly the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, who critiqued the unfaithfulness of the people of God, and the Gospels, in which Jesus lodges complaints against the religious leaders of his day.

3.3.2 White Evangelicalism is Viewed as Corrupted and Contingent

A qualitative analysis of the smaller pool of responses provided by interviewees surfaces the theme of corruption in particular. Evidence of this theme includes responses like the following: "white supremacy culturally appropriating religion," "reverse-engineered" theologies for political gain, and "misused interpretation" driven by a need for power. Several interviewees also located white evangelicalism as one among many strains of Christianity across geography and history: Alex called it "a movement within the American protestant Christian church," Tim described it as a "particular strain of Christianity that arose in the mid 1900s," Anya described it as "modern" and Jordan as a "sociopolitical movement." Notably, the interviewees were the only group in which the word "Bible" appeared as the result of three responses in which respondents indicated their perception that white evangelicalism as a movement misinterprets or misuses the text–it "twists Jesus and the Bible," in Jordan's words, "as justification for a white nationalist political agenda." Both of these patterns suggest an underlying belief that white evangelicalism is not how Christianity

has historically been or–even according to Protestant logics of Biblical interpretation–how it ought to be; its historical and hermeneutic specificity identifies it as a construction of forces beyond a plain reading of Scripture.

It makes sense that this group, all of whom maintained at the time of the study an identification as Christian, make the claim of corruption and misinterpretation alongside definitions that particularize evangelicalism. These arguments imply the corollary that other and better understandings of Christianity and its central messages remain available to them, mirroring the pattern among scholars noted in the introduction. This theme also emerged in interviews with reference to encounters with progressive Christians, for example, or Christians from other denominations or traditions; it appeared in posts as participants shared material from other and older Christian traditions or commented on the historical and cultural specificity of American evangelicalism and its dominant white mainstream. Participants sometimes leaned on this framing– that white evangelicalism was a corruption, and/or evangelicals misguided–in their rhetorical activity; it opened entry points for identification as well as critique, a theme to which I will return in Chapter 5 in particular. This definitional stance furthermore surfaces in explanations that writers offered for their rhetorical activity–Alex said that while he writes to challenge other Christians, he also wants "to make sure that other people are seeing that white evangelicalism doesn't speak for all of us."

Notably, not only these writers but the wider study-eligible group emphasized nationalism, which outranked "power" to make their top ten most frequent stemmed words. This may be a feature of the survey's timing, which many took just after the anniversary of the January 6, 2021, insurrection and frequent discussions of Christian nationalism in the news, and I should note that these definitions were provided in 2022, some time after the social media discussed in these chapters was initially posted. Nonetheless, this prophetic language, and in particular references too church

97

history–evangelicalism as one tradition among many–and to a multiplicity of relationships to or interpretations of Scripture–will return in later chapters and perhaps most especially this project's conclusion, wherein I return to the flexible uses to which participants put the rhetorical resources of their evangelical upbringing, and in what directions they reached beyond their own tradition.

3.4 Impressionable Years

If every definition of white evangelicalism is a story about change over time, it follows that an examination of participants' definitions can be enriched by a turn to the stories they told about their pasts. I suggest here that specific historical events and trends informed their definitions and critiques of white evangelicalism as a historical product and a domineering one, following the landmark political experiences of my study population's "impressionable years" (Jennings & Niemi, qtd. in Stoker). Political scientists have long posited that the political environment of young and early adulthood have a lasting, formative impact on an age cohort's political views. I extend that logic to participants' early experiences of other institutions and cultures, in this case the white evangelicalism of their childhood and young adulthood, and here recount three groupings of events that contributed to participants' alienation from white evangelicalism and frame many of the stories participants told about their own political and religious shifts (see "Participant Profiles," Chapter 2). Study participants often spoke of their growing awareness of the lockstep of Christians and the Republican party in terms of particular historical events, largely in response to an interview question that asked about the political background of their childhoods. The broadness of the question makes the strength of the following pattern all the more remarkable: Beth, Ivy, Felix, Anya, and Alex all mentioned the nexus of events that included 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and subsequent aggressive islamophobia in their home churches as significant features of their childhood experiences in evangelicalism. "I remember this in high school, or middle school, as Afghanistan

98

and the Iraq war were starting to happen," said Alex, who was raised in an ostensibly pacifist denomination. "I think there were some undertones then–whatever the Republican party is doing, that's the good thing, even if that means going to war… That was certainly the first political dynamics that I would've seen in the church."

The event of 9/11 itself may not be a potent personal memory for all members of the study population–the youngest millennials would have just started kindergarten when the event took place and are likely not in a position to do before and after comparisons of evangelical political culture– but the widespread islamophobia in American churches during their childhoods made a strong impression. Participants spoke about their memories of evangelicals' treatment of Muslims and, increasingly, refugees and immigrants from the Arab world, as disillusioning, something that–as they became adults–they viewed as profoundly out of step with their faith. Kelly cited controversy about Middle Eastern refugees as a significant experience of dissonance, and one that catalyzed her political evolution. Speaking about the xenophobic statements of Republican congresspeople around the time of 2016 election, she said that "immigration and, like, compassion for refugees…is definitely something that's really important to me, and so this doesn't seem to align with these guys."

The second nexus of events I put forward as significant for both the political socialization of my study population is the election of Barack Obama and, during his presidency, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement.[24] These events were themselves formative–but so was the backlash against them. For older members of the study population, the Obama-McCain race was the first presidential contest in which they were eligible to vote. Per historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez, Obama's 2008 campaign specifically targeted those evangelicals who "wanted to expand the list of

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[24] These groups of events are certainly related–islamophobia shaped reactions to Obama's candidacy, often centering on his name and his paternal relatives' Muslim faith, and conversely, growing discontent with the war in Iraq is viewed as a contributor to the success of Democratic candidates in the 2006 midterms and in 2008 (Smidt).

'moral values' to include things like poverty, climate change, human rights, and the environment,"

and had particular success with younger evangelicals–he doubled John Kerry's 2004 support among

white evangelicals 18-29, and his overall numbers saw a small bump (*Jesus and John Wayne* 237;

Goodstein). Among those young evangelical voters was Olivia, a detail she volunteered in our first

interview. But her most vivid memories of the experience were of the reactions of other

evangelicals. She reported being afraid to tell anyone she'd voted for him, and for good reason–she

returned to the college dorm to find friends weeping about his victory. Even Obama's modest gains

with voters like Olivia alarmed evangelical leaders, who returned to familiar discourses of

embattlement to galvanize political support for the GOP (Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*).

A similar cycle marks early evangelical responses to the Black Lives Matter movement. They

were not initially unilateral; Black evangelicals led expressions of support and challenged white

counterparts to follow suit. Black worship director and activist Michelle Higgins and a worship team

from InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a nationwide college ministry, made headlines for wearing

#BlackLivesMatter shirts on stage at the evangelical youth missions conference Urbana in 2015,

which took place just miles from Ferguson, Missouri (Grant); after a callout from Black pastor

Thabiti Anyabwile, influential pastor John Piper said that while he didn't support the sexual and

gender politics of the movements' leaders, he endorsed the slogan (Lee). The movement's launch

and its critiques of the church prompted acknowledgements the failure of "racial reconciliation"

efforts in evangelicalism, then galvanized a growing group of Black Christians like Brenda Salter

McNeil, Jemar Tisby, and Austin Channing Brown to more pointedly write, speak, and agitate

against racism in evangelical circles (Griswold). They got some traction–but that activism, too,

produced backlash. In 2019, Tisby wrote in the *Washington Post* about the responses he received

when he first began to write publicly about his negative experiences with police–"I can't list the

vitriol that erupted in the comment sections of similar posts on Twitter and Facebook." He can't call

himself evangelical anymore–first because it means "white," but second, because white evangelicals have made it so clear he doesn't belong. The summer of 2020, the time period this study most directly explores, saw intensified critiques of racism in evangelical institutions and communities, and the backlash against those who raised them.

The third trend I consider here surrounds sexuality and gender. Anxiety about evangelicals' position in the world–and in particular the transitional time in the mid-2000s after many Moral Majority heavyweights had died, and a new class of leaders not yet emerged (Smidt)–led, predictably, to increased concern about the sanctity and integrity of the family. For these millennials, robust discourses of purity and an outsize focus on sexual morality laid the backdrop of much of their adolescence. Purity pledges, abstinence-only sex education, widespread promotion of traditional gender roles and "complementarian" marriage, even the return of courtship–a form of dating that heavily involved the young woman's parents–were common features of evangelical culture during this time. Many former adherents use the term "purity culture" to describe this network and its touchstone teaching, sexual abstinence until heterosexual marriage (Natarajan et al.) Many who were raised in this culture, including both defectors and evangelicals, have argued that it offered them a limited, rules-based belief system, and one that prioritized the reproduction of straight, patriarchal, middle class family life over the more dominant themes of the Christian scriptures (Anderson, "Damaged"; Klein, "What is"; Welcher). Scholars also explicitly link these discourses of sexual purity with white supremacist ideals, including the idealization of white bodies while exoticizing and hypersexualizing non-white women (Hong; Natarajan et al.).

Purity culture defined the white evangelical culture of my participants' young adulthood, but its implications have been much discussed and powerfully revealed amid more recent sexual abuse crises in denominations including the Southern Baptist Convention and allegations of various kinds of harassment, abuse, and misogynistic behavior by high-profile evangelical pastors including Mark

Driscoll–who stepped down from Mars Hill Church in 2014, Bill Hybels–who retired from Willow

Creek Church in 2018 amid an investigation, and Andy Savage–who resigned from Highpoint

Church in 2018 (Klement & Sagarin; Moslener). The associated teachings of sexual purity have been

consistently used to disparage victims and prop up powerful men, and they appeared often in social

media debates over each successful scandal. On Twitter, survivors mirrored the rhetoric of the

#MeToo movement to assert the existence and prevalence of sexual exploitation in churches and

other Christian institutions (Burton). Popularized by creators Emily Joy and Hannah Paasch, the

#ChurchToo hashtag collects tweets about abuses of power from a myriad of Christian traditions in

and beyond evangelicalism. However, in part because it gained popularity during the 2017 Alabama

special election campaign featuring Roy Moore, an evangelical Christian who faced credible

allegations of pedophilic sexual abuse, #ChurchToo features many accounts of abuse by pastors,

elders, and other leaders or abuse those leaders ignored, dismissed, condoned, or covered up.

Themes of institutional harm feature prominently (Bogen et al.); and retrospectives–memoirs,

survivor accounts, even stories about the skits and activities millennials had encountered in their

abstinence-only sex education–appeared frequently on sites like Twitter and Instagram. Evangelicals

on social media, or attending to news from the evangelical world, would have encountered these

stories in the years leading up to 2020; the crisis of evangelicalism's moral authority on this point–as

with war in the Middle East and racism at home–framed their entry into adulthood in the church.

Other axes of power and its abuse also contribute to the political socialization of my

participants and their experiences of both church and internet. I have grouped these events around

two specific discourses of racism–anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Black sentiment–not because

these are the exclusive province of white evangelicalism, nor an exhaustive list. Study participants

also posted and spoke about anti-Asian discrimination and violence, and racism against Latinx

people. I remark on them here because they are two of the most defining features of evangelical

political anxiety during millennial evangelicals' impressionable years. I have furthermore connected these events to the teachings and popularity of "purity culture," a topic I encountered less frequently in interviews and social media observations, but one that nonetheless shapes the experience of my participants, and associated crises of sexual abuse. These three brief case studies underscore a theme: in 2000s and 2010s, evangelical media output and political mobilization in the United States focused on the ideal family and framed Muslims, a Black president, racial justice movements, and sex outside of heterosexual marriage as existential threats to their churches and communities. As I argued in the introduction, the term white evangelicalism emerges in this context as a useful shorthand to place responsibility with the white leaders who promulgated these ideas and most directly benefited from them and furthermore to name the reactionary racial politics of advocates of that very specific vision of white, middle class, heterosexual family life as the truest image of Christian faithfulness. Participants' growing historical consciousness, informed by their digitally-supported access to the America and the evangelicalism of their childhoods, produced an unsettling internal dissonance–one that required them to rename and re-narrativize their relationship with evangelicalism.

3.5 The Contact Hypothesis: Exposure to Difference Changes Attitudes

Part of the point of having evangelical media output at all–the kind that advanced established consensus on the Iraq War, or abstinence-focused sexual ethics– is to create alternatives to secular culture, and therefore to circumscribe the kinds of ideas that children, in particular, can access. Much of the anxious world-making of evangelical television and radio shows, magazines, conferences, camps, schools, and colleges was grounded in a truism shared by social scientists: exposure normalizes. This theory, known as "the contact hypothesis," contends that "intergroup contact can increase tolerance and empathy while decreasing stereotypes, prejudice, and conflict," which has been used by scholars across multiple disciplines to explore encounters across race,

103

religion, and gender and sexuality (Marr). I argue here that it's particularly relevant for understanding

not only the generational distance and tensions participants named above, but also their definitions

of white evangelicalism. Their childhoods and, perhaps more profoundly, their digital worlds were

and are marked by a diversity of race, gender, sexuality, and ideology that is historically novel and

presents profound challenges to the totalizing arguments of white evangelicalism. Not only does the

internet demonstrate for millennial raised-evangelicals how much has changed in their lifetimes

within American evangelicalism, but also how much variation there is beyond it.

I wrote in the introduction that religious categories change over time and religious practice

has been known to wax and wane over the life cycle. The data I glossed there furthermore suggests

that the religious landscape and experiences of younger Americans–Millennials and Generation Z–is

significantly different from those of their parents and grandparents. This is true not only of the

formative political and religious experiences I addressed there, but particularly true with regard to

the heterogeneity of their social networks. Once outside their communities of origin, even white

Millennials encounter a more racially and religiously diverse social world than their forebears. Janelle

Wong's work on Asian American and Latinx evangelicals proves instructive in understanding the

contours and impacts of this shift, advancing the established thesis that interreligious ties weaken

intolerance (Putnam & Campbell). Because evangelicals make up smaller proportions of Latinx and

Asian American populations more broadly, evangelicals in these groups are more likely to have

friends and family members who are not evangelical, or who might be religiously unaffiliated.

Furthermore, they "tend to have more racially diverse discussion networks than whites" (61). While

I don't make claims of exact parallels for members of my study population, in this section I explore

generational shifts in the United States that differentiate the experiences of older and younger white

evangelicals specifically with regard to interreligious and interracial ties. I begin by establishing some

demographic trends before returning to my study data and contextualizing it with scholarship from

higher education. I turn then to explicit mentions of generational difference in order to make sense of how participants understand ideas of national community. I note here that this section will, in moments, contrast white and non-white evangelicals in my study population; however, I remind readers that this project samples to maximize range, and not all study participants are white. Furthermore, they represent a range of sexual and gender identities.

Writers in the study consistently narrated experiences outside the institutional and cultural boundaries of their white evangelical community as significant to their shifting political and religious identity.[25] These encounters were frequently identified as disruptions or deviations from the evangelical ideal: straight, white, heterosexual, cisgender couples with children, middle class respectability, and ambient social and political conservatism. Anya named relationships with Muslim friends. Beck described meeting non-Christians, Christians from other traditions, and out LGBTQ people, and Christy described the transformational experience of meeting liberal professors at her Christian college who showed her it was possible "to hold more liberal political views and remain a faithful Christian." Beth described college encounters with "racial diversity and economic diversity" and realizing that bootstraps narratives don't work for "people who are disabled, or… people who are caregivers, or you can live in a very poverty-stricken area and still work 80 hours a week and make minimum wage, and that may not be enough for you." She went on to say, "I think seeing outside of myself and outside of our lifestyle was huge," an implicit association of conservative politics and Christianity with more variable identity markers like class position and preference over Biblical orthodoxy.

For American Christians in my study population, real life "diversity experiences"–or "contact," to use the language of the famed hypothesis–are increasing in frequency. The United

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[25] See participant profiles in Chapter 2 for participant profiles, which include demographic information and brief accounts of participants' religious and political journeys from childhood to adulthood.

States is more racially and religiously diverse now than it was in 1986, when the oldest of my participants was born, and considerably more diverse than it was in 1960, when my father, and probably some of the parents of my participants, were born. That means that people in my sample grew up with a greater number of non-evangelical and non-Christian peers than previous generations of evangelicals did, and–despite the persistence of *de facto* segregation in American schools and cities–probably had more interracial peer relationships than their parents. This point has, of course, been made before. In *The End of White Christian America,* published in 2016, Robert P. Jones summarizes religious change in the United States with a series of charts showing the declining proportion of Americans identified as white Christians in each successive age cohort, and then offers a case study: in the year 1974, when my parents were entering high school, two-thirds of Americans identified as Protestants and over half of Americans were white Protestants. Another quarter of Americans were Catholic. Forty years later, in Jones' 2014 survey data, white evangelical Protestants comprised only 10% of Americans under age 30. He further notes that retention rates for evangelical Protestants–so, the percentage of those raised in the church who continued as adults–dropped from around 75% to 62 for those coming of age in the 2000s (48-54). For people in my survey population, this means that fewer of their youth group friends could be expected to remain church attenders in adulthood. Even in overwhelmingly white churches, trends in international and transracial adoption[26] and interracial marriage[27] meant that some of those youth

[26] In 1999, the earliest year visualized on the U.S. Department of State website, the number of international adoptions was 15,717. In 2022, it was 1,517. Barna Group, an evangelical research firm, proudly announces that–per a 2013 study–Christians are twice as likely to adopt as the general population: "While only 2% of all Americans have adopted, this rises to 5% among practicing Christians." The same listicle includes reference to the impact of adoption on the racial and ethnic composition of both families and their churches, noting optimistically that "this trend may pave the way for renewed cross–ethnic hospitality and reconciliation within today's Christian community, which remains one of the most ethnically divided parts of U.S. society."

[27] Livingston and Brown report that in 1967, the year of the *Loving v. Virginia* decision, "3% of all newlyweds were married to someone of a different race or ethnicity." By 1980, the number was 7% and by 2015, it was 17%. The cumulative effect means that in 2015, 10% of all married people were married to someone of another race or ethnicity.

group friends were not white or had family members who were not white. Though the experience of children growing up inside white evangelicalism in the 1980-2000s would have reflected a more or less homogenous experience–for those attending majority white churches, "minority group status and marginality issues [would not have been] regular topics of theological reflection" (McKenzie & Rouse)–their early adult lives would be necessarily marked by a far greater number of interactions with non-white and non-Christian peers than their parents or grandparents had during those formative years. The racially diverse discussion networks and close ties to non-evangelicals that Wong cites as important to understanding political attitudes among Latinx and Asian American evangelicals may increasingly play a role for younger Christians who grew up in the white evangelical world.

For many participants–like Christy and Beth who in the examples above explicitly cite college–higher education as a key site for "diversity experiences." In the educational studies literature, this term refers primarily to racial diversity, and is often framed in terms of the exposure of white students to non-white student peers. This body of scholarship stresses that encounters with diversity do not automatically produce greater civic engagement or recognition of racism; however, both these outcomes are more likely for undergraduates who have diversity experiences.[28] Bowman's 2011 meta-analysis of college diversity experiences and civic engagement found positive associations with "civic attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors." While pre-college segregation affects the rate at which students report, for example, positive cross-racial interactions in college (Saenz), the effects of diversity experiences are persistent. Bowman et al.'s 2011 study of Catholic university

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[28] Many of my participants spoke of peers, sometimes peers with very similar experiences, who did not seem to have developed more tolerant attitudes toward those with marginalized identities. In this case, the self-selection of my study– writers resisting the ideas and rhetoric of the Christian Right–may prove telling: my participants are perhaps more likely to be in the group for whom these experiences had the effect of increasing civic outcomes like empathy and recognition of racism.

students indicated participation in racial/cultural awareness workshops and ethnic studies courses had positive, indirect effects on "recognition of racism and engagement in volunteering" measured thirteen years after graduation. This support for the contact hypothesis echoes other scholarship on the attitudes of religious college students toward LGBTQ people and rights. A study of millennial evangelical Protestant college students, published in 2015, found a thirty-point spread in support for same-sex marriage between those who knew someone in a same-sex relationship and those who didn't: 47.6% of respondents who knew someone in a same-sex relationship said same-sex marriage was "not wrong at all." Among those who reported not knowing anyone, that number was 17.5%. The findings furthermore emphasized that "millennial evangelical Protestants are not isolated from LGBQ[29] people or same-sex relationships, in spite of their religious affiliation and college attendance at an evangelical Protestant institution."[30]

The changes, generation to generation, in cohort composition and attitudes are dramatic when viewed in Jones' bar graphs, but perhaps not as visible in daily life–and might be particularly obscured for millennials with living parents who have experienced many of the same changes. But if we advance the "impressionable years" thesis addressed in this dissertation's introduction, which argues the experiences of a generation's formative years have an outsized effect on attitudes and beliefs later in life, the contrast–particularly among an individual's childhood social world and therefore oldest and most trusted relationships–becomes more stark. Those formative experiences

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[29] The parameters of this study did not include questions about transgender people; the acronym is explicated as: "lesbian women, gay men, bisexual, and queer identified people."

[30] Statistics tracking approval for same-sex marriage, about which longitudinal data is more readily available, show upward trend lines throughout the lifetime of my participants. Evangelical Protestants reliably report lower rates of support, but the generation gaps widened in the 2010s (Bailey). It is no doubt related to increasing numbers of Americans with out-LGBTQ friends and family; the rate of people who answered "Yes" to a Gallup question: "Do you have any friends or relatives or coworkers who have told you, personally, that they are gay or lesbian?" has increased from 25% in 1985 to 75% in 2013. It would doubtless be higher now; in 2021, 31% of the sample answered "Yes" when asked "Do you have any friends or relatives or coworkers who have told you, personally, that they are transgender?" ("LGBTQ+ Rights").

shape not only the kinds of opinions measured in polling, but also their imagined communities. As Chapter 4 in particular will illuminate, many participants also credit social media for exposing them to ideas and experiences that informed their shifting political views, using language strikingly similar to scholarship on diversity experiences and the contact hypothesis: learning from the social media writing of transgender friends, for Ivy, was revelatory; for Anya, the stories her Black classmates shared online sparked self-interrogation and a commitment to anti-racism. In many ways, the collapsed contexts that make social media writing challenging also extend the potency of what might otherwise be a passing encounter with difference. A white evangelicals' Black coworker from a high school job might now, ten years later, be a significant presence on their digital feeds. For participants whose early diversity experiences influenced their openness, online engagement can reinforce fledgling attitudes and shift their trajectory. And the language of "white evangelicalism" might help them tell that story.

3.6 Rhetorical Usefulness

As I glossed in the introduction to this dissertation, white evangelicalism has emerged as a useful term to identify the racial majority and racial politics of evangelicalism in the United States. I turn now to a more granular look at the backgrounds of millennial Americans who used this language to describe their own childhoods.

The quote with which I opened this chapter, from a pilot study participant who grew up in the Southern Baptist Convention and reports that as a child she understood herself as "just Christian," without qualifiers, illuminates the second primary argument of this chapter. Significant data now suggests that the political overtones of the term "evangelical" has led some Americans to claim the label regardless of factors like church attendance, assent to theological distinctives, or even membership in an entirely different religious tradition, Christian or not. My data also suggests that

people adopt terms like "raised evangelical" for similar reasons. While many may be disidentifying with evangelicalism because of its political connotations, rather than any change to their theological beliefs or the strength of their faith, others are adopting the term white evangelicalism to describe the nexus of political, cultural, and social conservatism and white American Christianity in their childhoods. This may, again, have little to do with the theological positions of their families or home communities; it may have little to do with the level of engagement in religious practice that was normative in their family or community. But the term serves an important purpose: describing one's community of origin as "white evangelicalism" gives language for political baggage that's increasingly visible in retrospect; it serves as a shorthand for communicating that they were raised in a value system they now view as homophobic, xenophobic, misogynistic, racist, and/or damaging in other ways.

The first piece of evidence I put forward here is a breakdown of the denominational affiliations of 304 total responses to my survey question about the same. These responses come from folks who met the survey's basic eligibility criteria–respondents were in the United States, described themselves as having been raised in white evangelicalism, and were born in the years 1986-1996. Note that the count of responses here differs from the number of overall responses to the question about defining white evangelicalism, likely a reflection of their respective placement in the survey and the size of the cognitive task the question required respondents to do.

Table 2: Survey respondents by denominational affiliation

Denomination	Count	Percentage of Respondents
Non-denominational	99	32.5
Baptist	88	28.9
Reformed	55	18.1
Pentecostal	29	9.5

Presbyterian	24	7.9
Methodist	20	6.6
Anabaptist	5	1.6
Other (please describe)	43	14.1
Anglican	3	
Evangelical Free	8	
Nazarene or Wesleyan	9	
Church of Christ	5	
Episcopalian	2	
Sovereign Grace Ministries	2	
Catholic	2	
Evangelical Covenant Church	2	
Christian Missionary Alliance	2	
Church of God	2	
Assemblies of God	1	
Evangelical Friends	1	
Seventh-Day Adventism	1	
Calvary Chapel	1	
Free Methodist	1	
Mormon	1	

This data, as presented, poses some challenges. The survey question was designed to elicit general

"flavors" of Christian tradition in order to achieve balance in the interview sample, so the categories

are not finely grained. Respondents who select the category "Presbyterian" may have grown up in

the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a conservative denomination that does not ordain

women and is categorized by the Pew Research Center as "Evangelical Protestant," or in the

Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), which is categorized as a mainline Protestant organization

("Appendix B"), and one that has ordained LGBTQ members as church leaders nationwide since

2012; those respondents may also have grown up in any number of smaller denominations with the word "Presbyterian" in the name. However, additional data from interviews indicates that mainline and evangelical distinctions, in particular, mapped unevenly onto the experiences of young people growing up in Christian communities in the 1990s and 2000s. One interview participant, Christy, attended a PCUSA church growing up. Her congregation had a female associate pastor, but she recalls purchasing a pro-life t-shirt at a Christian music festival she attended with her youth group and reports that her home church split when the denomination made way for the ordination of gay clergy. While the public face of the PCUSA today is more progressive–news from their 2022 General Assembly covered their vote to divest from fossil fuel companies (Smietana, "Presbyterians")–Christy's experience was shaped by regional evangelical media infrastructure: for example, that Christian music festival, which was headlined in 2009, to pick a year with easily available data, by Christian Contemporary Music acts like David Crowder Band, Chris Tomlin, and Casting Crowns (Liu). It was also shaped by national norms around gender and sexuality–in 2006, just 35% of U.S. adults were in favor of same-sex marriage (Pew, "Attitudes")–and regional political culture in a historically Republican area. Someone like Christy, though she grew up in a denomination firmly categorized as mainline, still participated in the evangelical media culture that shaped both broad, public understandings and her personal understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. "White evangelicalism" offers an effective shorthand for naming the wider context of her childhood religious practice: that "ambient" evangelicalism that was present in any Protestant community of the 2000s (Vaca 157).

Christy is not alone–others whose denominational background would not be categorized by pollsters as evangelical also selected "yes" when asked if they were raised in white evangelicalism. In the "Other" category, we find a Mormon respondent, Catholics, and Episcopalians, as well as those whose childhood affiliation may or may not be considered evangelical–Pew Research groups

112

Anglican/Episcopalian with ambiguous affiliations or "not further specified" as evangelical "if born again," a survey question Margolis has argued emerged from a specific historical moment and no longer effectively distinguishes religions identification among contemporary respondents. Anabaptists, too, may or may not be categorized as evangelical depending on the specific denomination and/or the respondents answer to the survey item about being born again–in fact, Alex grew up in a church affiliated with two denominations, one grouped by Pew as "Anabaptist in the evangelical tradition" and another as "Anabaptist in the mainline tradition." Robust pacifist traditions in the Anabaptist umbrella also place them at odds with what one might call God-and-country evangelicalism, which has historically been marked by robust support for Second Amendment rights and the military. Alex, however, recalls an early sense of dissonance around the burgeoning support for the war in Iraq in a purportedly pacifist congregation; he describes drawing on Mennonite theologies critical of government in his resistance to arguments that Christians should "submit" to the authority of Donald Trump (a reference to Romans 13:1, which urges readers to "be subject to governing authorities" (NRSV)).

The common denominator among respondents was their responses to the question "How did your family identify politically?" Of the 286 responses to this question, 181–63%–selected only "Republican." When combined with those who selected "Republican" alongside the options "Libertarian," "Independent," and "Politically disengaged (e.g., did not vote)"–that percentage of total responses grows to 77% of the total. A further 6% of responses included selections of both "Republican" and "Democrat." Some respondents who selected "Other" clarified in the space available that one parent–usually a father–was conservative and another–usually a mother–might sometimes vote Democrat, a phenomenon perhaps also reflected in responses that selected both "Republican" and "Democrat." Some who selected the "Other" option included stories like Gabe's: he reported that his parents were "Conservative but never identified a party to me." Similar answers

included "didn't talk about it," and "Conservative, but not necessarily Republican." A few respondents mentioned abortion specifically–one whose parents voted with their teacher's union, but were anti-abortion, another–who selected both "Republican" and "Other"–describes their parents as "Formerly democrat but shifted to Republican in the 90s after perceiving themselves as being 'pushed out' by the left for being pro life." In whatever permutation, an overwhelming majority of respondents reported that during their childhood their families, if politically active, were conservative. Of the interview participants, 7 identified their families as "Republican," 2 as "Libertarian" and "Republican," 1 as "Independent" and 2 with some combination of "Republican," and "Democrat." (Gabe, above, selected "other.")

As I outline in my methods chapter, I selected interview participants to maximize range on a number of demographic factors including race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, geography, education level, current and former denominational affiliation, and present-day religious practice. Even so, every single interviewee reported that their families participated in Vacation Bible School (VBS) when they were kids. Even in this small sample, the trend is very clear: participants who identify as raised-evangelicals don't share much in the way of denominational or theological distinctives, now or during their growing up years. What they have in common is politically conservative families and childhood church attendance, participation in youth groups and mission or service trips, Sunday school, family devotions, maybe Christian K-12 or college education, and all the curriculum, media, and cultural artifacts that accompanied those activities and generated the imagined community of evangelicalism in the 1990s and 2000s. Historian George Marsden is supposed to have said, in a statement that has passed into lore, that an evangelical is anyone who likes Billy Graham. You could say–based on this data–that a raised-evangelical is anyone who attended VBS, or anyone who grew up watching *VeggieTales*, a video series in which animated vegetables parody Bible stories to teach

kids about truth-telling, kindness, and doing the right thing when it's hard. And many of those kids, now adults, don't see those values in America's white evangelical church.

3.7 Leaders, Elders, Parents

Participants' definitions of white evangelicalism are damning, as are their critiques. Viewed in the context of the tensions of their impressionable years, the writers have good reason for shifting from a reactionary politics to viewpoints that better address the dissonance between their values and their non-evangelical, non-white, and LGBTQ+ friends–or their own experiences of finding themselves, as adults, outside the white evangelical ideal. But those Republican parents remain their parents–a reckoning with one's own evangelical past requires a reckoning with one's elders, too. Though these intergenerational relationships were not a focus of this study, generational differences came up frequently in discussions of participants' childhoods and their political and theological evolutions. I suggest here that while their critiques and definitions are stringent, their relationships with loved ones mediated the way they express those positions in their social media writing. They may in fact be attenuated by positive relationships with members of older generations, including the experience of empathetic dialogue with members of their own family.

While Tyler was the only participant whose definition of white evangelicalism explicitly mentioned pastors, feelings of betrayal and anger at evangelical leaders are not uncommon among raised-evangelicals. While millennials are now in leadership in many spheres of religious life, this critique of powerful figures is generally directed at older Christians, those pastors, elders, theologians, and teachers that millennial raised-evangelicals remember from their youth as significant figures either in their own communities or on the national stage. In the social media feeds of millennial raised-evangelicals like my participants, generational differences are often framed in antagonistic terms, both in terms of critiques of older Christians, Christian leaders, and evangelical

history, as well as in more oblique references, like memes about rising costs and declining quality of life in the United States.[31] Ivy, for example, consistently expressed the sentiment that her parents' generation didn't understand what the world was like for younger Americans, and in particular didn't understand her and her peers' experiences of Christian institutions. Perhaps more than any other participant, she engaged in discussion on her Facebook page with leaders and mentors from her childhood evangelical community, questioning their devotion to Donald Trump and expressing her disappointment and frustration.

For others, the avatar of older Christians' attachment to Trumpism was a grandparent, an uncle, a family friend, a former pastor, or even just older Christians they saw sharing reactionary takes on Twitter. After January 6, 2021, in particular, more than one participant reported distancing themselves from family members–at least on Facebook–because of their comments or posts defending Trump and the insurrectionists–but throughout the year under examination in this study, older adults within and beyond the writers' family were a sort of spectral audience for their writing, marked by a mingled sense of appreciation–for those earnest people who loved them and raised them–and betrayal at their abandonment of the values they'd once shared. The collective sentiment seems to be that "Boomers" identified the wrong enemy–it wasn't people of other faiths, secular

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[31] One point of on-going generational dissonance, for some writers, was their elders' views about poverty. Sociologist Lydia Bean suggests that American white evangelicals tend to view social programs as "expressions of 'grace' toward morally unworthy people" (Bean, qtd. In Wong 40). Participants like Gabe and Ivy, however, both posted often about working in retail, wealth inequality and rising costs; their experience of low-wage employment and the social media activity that reinforced the narrative of generational precarity built identification with those whom their childhood church communities had denigrated. Gabe, in particular, also spoke frequently in interviews and wrote online about the church's mistreatment of the poor. Ivy posted frequently about "millennials" and "boomers," pushing back on ambient critiques that young people complain too much about student debt or should be more frugal in order to afford real estate. On September 11, 2020, she shared screenshotted tweet from @DanaVivianWhite that reads: "'Millennials' is used in the media to infantilize, discredit, and instill distrust of an educated, hard-working, low-earning, fed up generation of 30-somethings living through the worst of capitalism, police brutality, government corruption, and a resurgence of hate violence." A year later, after the conclusion of the study observation period, she shared a post from Qasim Rashid, Esq., that noted rising costs of housing and decreasing tax rates and accused Boomers of "clos[ing] the door behind" them when they achieved milestones of middle class stability.

culture, or sexual diversity; America's ills were not the fault of the lazy poor or "welfare queens." The call was coming from inside the house.

For some participants, close connections who were in church leadership during their childhoods—what Anya aptly called the "middle management" of church—appeared frequently in their social media activity as commenters or respondents. A number of them also frequently interacted with older family members—parents, uncles, and grandparents—on social media platforms, most commonly on Facebook. The writers were not, as a rule, antagonistic toward older or more established Christians in their personal lives, particularly members of their immediate families. Almost all of those who talked in the interviews about their parents described positive relationships with one or both parents. Though I did not intend it, nor have any mechanism to foresee and control for it, many of the writers in my interview pool have personal ties to church leaders—2 are pastors, 1 is in seminary, 2 are married to pastors, 3 the child of ordained ministers or chaplains, and almost all report that their families of origin were or are deeply involved in their churches. One interview subject described herself on her survey response as an "MK" or missionary kid; another told me in the course of her interview that she had, like me, spent several years of her early childhood in a now-independent state of the former Soviet Union as the daughter of American mission workers directed to that region after the fall of the Iron Curtain. That level of institutional embeddedness likely shapes the participants' lived faith, in particular by increasing time spent in corporate religious practice. It likely also increases the friction they would experience if they stepped back from Christianity as many of their peers have done; religious retention rates are often associated with factors like highly religious parents, parochial schooling, and adolescent religious engagement—in other words, the extent to which one's life, and the lives of one's loved ones, are intertwined with their religious practice ("Modeling the Future"; Smith & Sikkink).

Positive or at least sympathetic views of one's own family members, especially of older generations, who are "professional" Christians may shape the writers' sense of their own audience–they may, for example, give older church-goers the benefit of the doubt in a way that those with tenser parent-child relationships might not. In comments we revisit in Chapter 4, Tyler told me his mom gets her news from Facebook and loves their nationally known Republican congressperson, but also said "I'll talk to her about conservative politicians and she has no idea who they are," of inflammatory figures like Lauren Boebert (R-CO) and Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), both outspoken advocates of QAnon and election conspiracies who have repeatedly made the news for inflammatory or inappropriate behavior. Tyler's comment indicates a belief that his mom is mis- or under-informed, rather than hostile to his own convictions. The charitable narrative participants negotiated about their own childhoods was a version of "they did they best they could," given the limited resources available and the overdetermined culture of white evangelicalism in the 1980s-2000s, marked by James Dobson books and potent cultural anxieties about everything from teen pregnancy to terrorism.

Those positive relationships might also causally increase their belief in the possible effectiveness of open dialogue about their experiences and beliefs. Kelly, for example, reported talking to her parents about how their conservative community's convictions about gender roles negatively shaped her adolescence. Ivy reports being thankful for her parents, noting her knowledge of peers who had found it difficult–or impossible–to engage with older adults about their childhood church experiences or evolving beliefs: "the difference between my parents and some other people's parents was my parents have been willing to have those conversations so that we can reconcile on those ends." But even those who found their parents difficult to engage on the issues still worked to construct narratives of their past that named the evils of the ideology they'd absorbed then–as the term "white evangelicalism" is so often used to do–yet protected their intimate relationships. In the

118

wake of the January 6th insurrection, Tyler shared the following tweet from user @mcoleyyy: "I keep thinking about the 'secular dangers' my parents were warned about in the 90s. Evangelical leaders stirred up fear about what could lead children astray. Turns out that Christian Nationalism and their own hypocrisy would be the greatest stumbling blocks to my generation." This statement indicts evangelical *leaders* for fear-mongering, placing primary blame beyond the scope of the user's parents, who are framed as almost gullible or easily misled. Historicizing those warnings and "secular dangers" does, however, give parents an opportunity to occupy a different role in the present. It also allows their children to have some empathy for those who fell victim to fear, even as they hold out a higher standard of integrity for those leaders with greater power–and a dangerous thirst for more.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed contemporary scholarship on the evangelical movement, definitions of white evangelicalism, and the ways in which the imagined communities of evangelicals vary by race, ethnicity, nationality, and generation. I have further outlined how the results of my study advance that literature: exclusively theological definitions of evangelicalism do not reflect the perspectives of those who were raised in it; participation in a "culture of consumption," to return to Du Mez, is a more potent touchstone, and themes of corruption and the pursuit of political power dominate definitions offered by respondents in my study population. Furthermore, respondent definitions and interview statements push back on evangelicalism's exclusive claims to truth, identifying economic, cultural, and theological variation and change as a counterpoint to the assumed timelessness of evangelical norms and values. However, the definition of evangelicalism is perhaps as unstable at the level of the individual as it is contested by historians, sociologists, and other scholars, and most usefully framed by rhetorical considerations: what are people using this category to signal about others, or about themselves? The descriptor "white" helps raised-evangelical

rhetors invoke their critiques particularly of a powerful group whose imagined national community–the group of fellow citizens to whom adherents owe their loyalty and civic responsibility, is narrowed to their co-religionists.

It is, however, language that implies such a provocative critique that the term does not appear in the writing collected for this study. The closest is a set of tweets from Beck that make reference to white evangelicals as a voting bloc, and a *New York Times* opinion piece shared by Christy, which does the same. (That piece's teaser reads: "Once a religious bloc in search of political purchase, white evangelicals have become a political bloc with a religious past." Christy notes that she doesn't think she entirely agrees with the author, but "some of the evidence she includes is compelling.) In their posts directed to or overheard by evangelical audiences–which they wrote a year or more before they answered my survey and composed the definitions addressed in this chapter–the writers tend to frame those audiences as misguided people who want to do what is right, but lack understanding, people for whom the writer might fruitfully model other ways of thinking, voting, and being Christian. The distance between that sympathetic frame and the dominant theme in their definitions–white evangelicalism as marked by its thirst for and abuse of power–represents the range of views in the study pool and within the writers themselves, as they struggled to navigate what and when to write back. In the next chapter, I turn to interview comments that illuminate how these writers thought about the affordances of social media and of their own rhetorical work.

Chapter 4 A Bearable Witness

4.1 Introduction

During this study's focal period, which coincided with lockdown and social distancing measures implemented to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus, time spent on social media increased for American adult users, bucking projected downturns to reach new heights (Williamson) even as public sentiment about social media was overwhelmingly negative (Molla). As the pandemic limited socializing and moved many activities online, engagement intensified and social media platforms gained ever greater prominence as the primary site of political talk. And–in a contentious presidential election year bookended by impeachments of the incumbent, punctuated by eruptions of violence, murders of multiple Black Americans by law enforcement, and protests against police brutality and white supremacy–there was plenty of political talk underway. In fact, that political talk took on increasing urgency: the internet culture of 2020, on the heels of a decade of robust digital activism and the increasing contentiousness of American political life, was framed by widespread discussion not only about the trending topics of the day, but about digital political talk itself–the norms and assumptions that should govern our collective digital life and guide social movements online.

All the social media users in this study leveraged their Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts to "write back" during 2020, and many of them posted frequently–but they did so with notable ambivalence. Tyler, the study's youngest participant, expressed discomfort with the power of tech companies in determining his information diet. He also lamented how those companies had affected his loved ones. Facebook is his mom's main source of news, he told me–a reflection of the

ways in which social media has increasingly displaced local news media as the "centre of local political information infrastructure" (Thorson et al.), often to troubling effect. Tyler, who is at this point much more politically liberal than his parents, lamented how unaware his mom seems to be of the actual decisions and behavior exhibited by her favorite Republican politician. He drew a strong contrast between her use of Facebook and his own goals for social media engagement:

> I assume [the content Mom sees] is either targeted or reposted from friends or something like that, which is the kind of space I try to avoid on social media…I try not to trap myself in a space where I can't see differing views or, on the other hand, just to see accounts that affirm what I think or... I don't think it's as healthy or it's not going to help me grow as much as being able to see more discussion and disagreement.

After a long period of minimal use, Tyler finally decided to delete his Facebook account in 2021, so that account was not part of this study's data collection. During our first interview in early 2022, he reported that he maintained his Instagram and Twitter accounts, posting rarely and mostly reading. He did, though, intentionally "try to retain [in my Twitter feed] some people who I don't agree with, or who just don't really believe exactly the same things." He reiterated that this is "helpful"–a word he used four times in three sentences–to spur reflections on what he believes religiously and politically, and "to see the difference[s] in tactics and rhetoric," particularly from those he agreed with in his more robustly evangelical past.

In the 2020 social media posts collected for this project, Tyler's writing was reflective in tone–he tweeted laments about violence against Black Americans, asked for insight and reading recommendations from theology professors, shared reflections on sermons he'd heard and a first-person account of his encounter with pro-Trump protestors. One of the posts he considered submitting with his initial survey response–so, something he personally and explicitly identified as "writing back"–was an Instagram video of himself playing and singing a song its composer described

as "gospel song for everyone," which Tyler captioned with "a sort of jumbled statement about the white church in America." The caption stood for a number of months from 2020 into 2021, but Tyler eventually took it down. (A new coworker had commented on the old post, a jarring experience of context collapse.) He described his motivation for both the post and the caption deletion in terms of the "universality of the song," something he could extend to his own social network–"just like passing along the song that I felt was really speaking to the current moment, and I had something to say [in the caption] that I later decided didn't need to be said."

Using social media thoughtfully is a lot of work, the writers reported. You're fighting your own psychology and the sometimes-mythologized algorithm that wants to reinforce the kind of content–from ideology to aesthetics–that you're already inclined to consume (Thorson et al.). Scholars have long studied ambivalence and regret among social media writers (e.g., Thorson, Wang et al.), and retrospective curation–the kind Tyler did when he went back to a months-old post and took it down, not wanting new connections to have access to a record of his less than current thinking–is not uncommon (Jacobsen). Over time, not only one's position on an issue, but one's relationship to and investment in political talk online might change. Tyler's roots in conservative evangelical circles and his later distance from them inflect what he posts and doesn't, how he navigates his own posts' exposure to the algorithm via hashtags and searchable metadata, and what posts he later takes down. The threshold of "speaking to the current moment" and saying only what needs to be said, and said by the writer themself, is a high one for any potential post. The writers in this study navigated those messages–and made rhetorical decisions–by turning to the underlying and more fundamental questions about who they were and how they wanted to represent their values to the nebulous audiences they encountered online.

Tyler's experiences and comments encapsulate many of the core themes of this chapter, and in fact foreshadow its central argument. He expressed wariness, but also a sense of growth or its

possibility, when he talked about social media. When he talked about writing his own posts, he was concerned with saying something both urgent and necessary. My larger project explores how raised-evangelical writers used social media to reconfigure their religious identities in 2020; in the introduction to this dissertation, I established "writing back" as a religious practice. I build on that assertion, arguing here that the writers conceptualize the work of writing back on algorithm-mediated social media platforms as a form of Christian "witness." They adapt this ancient rhetorical tradition–one in which rhetors recount what they have learned and experienced of God, with the hope of sharing that truth, encouraging others in faith, and bringing them closer to God–to the new and unexpected writing conditions of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in 2020. This chapter outlines several specific ways they negotiate those shifting religious identities through both the ways they think about their social media use and the ways they encourage others to use it.

In this chapter, I outline how I reached this conclusion, exploring how writers like Tyler drew on witness, a rhetorical resource of their evangelical childhoods, as a flexible decision-making frame that helped them negotiate the felt need to speak about their religious and political convictions amid–and sometimes against–the opaque and sometimes sinister constraints of the algorithm. I begin by reviewing witness as a religious and rhetorical tradition. I set up witness as a strategy participants use to negotiate their beliefs about social media, which exist in tension with one another–first, that social media is dangerous, and second, that social media can be a vector for growth. Both of these beliefs assume that social media is formative; that is, our use of it and its use of us have much to do with the kind of people we are and are becoming. Finally, I outline three features of this framework that map the thinking and rhetorical work of my participants. Ultimately, I contend that the paradigm of witness allowed writers to make sense of the ambiguities of algorithm-mediated digital writing and to conceptualize networked persuasion while managing their expectations for rhetorical success; in particular, integrity operated as a metric for deciding when and

how to engage difficult topics about which they had convictions and concerns. Their approach

recalls the perplexing words of Matthew 10, which records Jesus sending his disciples out to

"proclaim the good news," "cure the sick," and "cast out demons": "be wise as serpents and

innocent as doves."[32]

4.2 An Evangelical Resource for the Digital Age

My participants, born between 1986 and 1996 and raised in the evangelical media ecosystems

of the 1990s and 2000s, are not strangers to the concept of witness, and are intimately familiar with

the touchstone belief that all of one's life, including public and political life, should reflect one's faith

in God. The tenet that every part of one's life should be submitted to God's authority is in many

ways a hallmark of evangelical world-making, and often a pillar of the push to align legislative policy

with evangelical values. (Sexual abstinence until marriage, traditionally held to be the clear teaching

of the Bible, is a particularly potent and intimate example; much effort has been spent regulating sex

education in schools to promote it.[33]) Daniel Vaca argues, along with Kristin Kobes Du Mez, that

evangelicalism is also a consumer identity; the heyday of evangelical publishing and Christian book

distributors and stores was buoyed by the contention that what you purchased–and therefore, the

media you read, watched, and listened to–marked your identity as a believer, even as that same

industry distributed widely in American markets (Vaca opens his book, *Evangelicals, Incorporated*, with

the enormous popularity of Rick Warren's bestselling *The Purpose-Driven Life*, published in 2002–

when study participants were between the ages of six and sixteen–and reportedly read by a quarter

of all American adults). But it wasn't all purity rings and Bible cartoons instead of Disney Channel–

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[32] Excerpted from Matthew 10:7-16, NRSV.
[33] Scholars like Sara Moslener have done extensive work on the True Love Waits movement and the expansion of sexual purity to discourses around modesty (see also Michael, "Wearing Your Heart,"), which emphasized for teens of the 1990s and 2000s that their most intimate choices should reflect their devotion to God. In this case, that devotion was measured by public declarations of abstinence until heterosexual marriage in the form of pledge cards, skits, and rings.

some groups, like then-called Evangelicals for Social Action, campaigned for fuel efficient vehicles under the slogan, "What Would Jesus Drive?" an initiative their website still describes in this language: "Jesus is Lord of all of one's life, then the kind of car one drives is an ethical choice affecting the environment and future generations" ("CSA History").

Of course, this tradition of witness is, on its own, of limited use to raised-evangelicals who are seeking to distance themselves from some of the most pointed emphases of the evangelical witness in the 21st century. While I begin with white evangelicalism's rhetorical tradition, a formative one for raised-evangelicals in the study and the wider population, I don't put it forward as the exclusive or even, in some cases, the primary tradition from which participants source their ideas about what witness means and how it might be enacted. I suspect, in fact, that as the heyday of Christian bookstores blurred lines between evangelicalism and mainline Protestantism, and even Catholicism–see Chapter 3 for relevant discussion of this slippage–the Trump-era crises of American evangelicalism have further entangled the media ecosystems in which American millennial Christians are consuming and sharing religious material. As progressive and never-Trump evangelical figures were pushed out of evangelical institutions and the connotations of the term itself began shifting rapidly, some younger raised-evangelicals followed their prior stalwarts out of identification or turned to older Christian movements and sects. The participants in this project were actively reconstituting the media ecosystems that formed their religious identities, turning to other Christian traditions as resources to understand and represent their evolving practices and convictions–a phenomenon and argument I will address more fully in Chapter 6. For now, I raise it to establish that just as my participants sourced their social media posts from many locations, accounts, and platforms, their framework for witness is cross-pollinated with other Christian traditions and other cultural resonances, as well. I review a few of these reference points below,

before turning to the ways in which the internet culture of 2020 inflected participants' felt need to speak and how they chose to do so.

4.2.1 Evangelical Traditions of Witness

The terms proselytism, evangelism, and witness are often used interchangeably, a slippage that muddies all three with connotations of coercive, and sometimes violent, tactics Christians have used throughout history to "win souls for Christ."[34] In a theme I will return to later in this chapter, at least one participant explicitly told me that although she held out the possibility of persuasion, she viewed her social media writing as distinct from her past experiences in evangelistic ministry, attributing that different in part to her decision to cede responsibility for the lives and choices of others. I hereby invoke dictionary definitions to distinguish witness from proselytism (attempting to make converts) or evangelism (preaching the "good news") and treat witness not as a genre or even set of practices, so much as a way of thinking about the demands and uncertainties of rhetorical work that engages deep convictions about truth, morality, and ethics. While I make reference to the genres associated with witness's intellectual history in evangelical circles– among them "giving one's testimony," or offering a narrative account of God's work in one's life– I consider witness in this chapter as an interpretive frame focused not on making converts, but on representing one's faith in public. That representation is marked by several themes that resonated across the scholarship and the statements of study participants: a humble acceptance of the limits of one's persuasive power, and an emphasis on speaking the truth as you know it, regardless of what happens next.

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[34] For a fascinating discussion of the ideas of proselytism and tolerance in evangelical history and how these ideas informed the development of the culture and institutions of colonial America, please see Bejan, "Evangelical Toleration." Bejan identifies strains of thought that identified toleration as a "necessary precondition for evangelism," eschewing violent tactics that would inhibit true and sincere conversion to Christianity. Roger Williams, for example, "believed that the true form of Christ's worship had eluded Christians since the conversion of Constantine had tempted them with the powers of proselytism and persecution. Nevertheless, the "saints" could fulfill their charitable duty to evangelize by witnessing against that which was false in Christendom" (1108). Freedom of conscience both dictated the practice and informed the content of this rhetorical activity.

Extant scholarship on witness as it emerges from evangelical communities is itself often undertaken by Christian scholars seeking to make contributions to their religious communities, using Biblical language to theorize what witness is and how it is best pursued. Much of this begins with parallels drawn between rhetorical theory and theology. James E. Beitler III–at time of writing, a professor at Billy Graham's alma mater, Wheaton College–wrestles explicitly with the unknowability of rhetorical success in a book on "rhetoric in the life of the church": Christians, he says, must believe both that "God often acts powerfully in spite of our own actions," or regardless of the effectiveness of our rhetorical choices, but also that God works in and through human action– including rhetorical practice. Therefore, spiritual maturity may include attention to the rhetoric of witness. Yet in Beitler's wide framing of witness, success does not depend on the visible metrics of the effectiveness of a rhetor's persuasive work. As in the Parable of the Sower,[35] the disciple must share their message even though they know that sometimes, the seed falls on inhospitable soil.

In this understanding, witness is not limited to written or spoken rhetorical activity; Beitler frames the category of witness widely to include many ways in which Christians represent their faith and live out their beliefs, including worship and engagement in political and public life. He also compares the teaching of ancient rhetoric–in which students were encouraged to emulate their masters–with Christian discipleship, marked by modeling one's life after exemplars in the faith and Jesus Christ himself. This emphasis on character–both of the individual and the movement–is a hallmark of the rhetoric high profile evangelicals used to argue against Donald Trump. Scholar

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[35] The Parable of the Sower refers to a passage in Matthew 13:1-9. In the NRSV, it reads: "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!""

Michael J. Medhurst's review of that rhetoric gathers examples of "arguments from evangelical witness" that concerned "the nature, purpose, and direction of the evangelical movement itself" (9). These include the assertion that Christians should be distinct from non-believers in their political behavior; in former Southern Baptist Convention president Russell Moore's words, evangelical support for Trump was "damage done to gospel witness" ("If Donald Trump").

The biographical resonance of witness is underscored by the genres often attached to the concept, particularly in more contemporary scholarship on evangelical and evangelical-adjacent Christian rhetoric. Bethany Mannon argues that "witnessing, or giving one's testimony" operates as an "antecedent genre," a kind of conscious precedent informing the work of women memoirists and writers like Jen Hatmaker and Sarah Bessey who both had bestselling "Christian living" books in the 2010s. These figures strategically use evangelical discourse and cultural norms in their storytelling to question gendered expectations about marriage, church leadership, and sexual purity in the evangelical world. She describes Hatmaker and Bessey as "Xvangelical" writers: a group comprised of mostly women, Millennials and Gen X, who "who see their faith in terms of relationship and freedom rather than politics and dogma" and depart from "adversarial discourse" common in evangelical culture.[36] Storytelling, however, has its own robust roots in evangelical circles; it operates as one of a suite of invitational rhetorics taking on increasing importance for this religious group and its offshoots, put to varying uses that follow ideological variation among American Christians.

Mannon's work conceptualizes witness more narrowly than I do–she identifies witness as a genre, where I use it as an interpretive frame; she furthermore focuses on high-profile women speakers and writers rather than the everyday cross-section of raised-evangelicals my study seeks to

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[36] Her definition focuses, like this study, on raised-evangelicals who continue to consider themselves Christian; the hashtag that produced this term also encompasses people who view themselves as ex-Christian (Chastain, "Exvangelical–A Working Definition").

represent. But her use of confessional blogging to develop her understanding of raised-evangelicals' emerging understandings of faith squares with scholarship on the affordances of social media and attendant cultural shifts around first-person narratives as argumentation, captured by phenomena like the "memoir boom" of the 2000s (see Smith & Watson; Rak). danah boyd wrote in 2010 that "[social media] profile generation is an explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment" ("Social Network Sites" 43). Witness involves some kind of offering of the self, which is almost unavoidable on a Facebook profile attached to one's legal name, or an Instagram feed that also features photos of one's children. The coincidence of social media and the rise–and, in Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò's analysis, elite capture–of identity politics, in which the self is commonly invoked as a source of experiential authority, only add greater emphasis to this overlap (see also Bennett).[37]

The thread of these traditions most relevant here is not only a robust emphasis on character and its centrality to credibly representing Christ in the world, a concern we will return to in the later section on "integrity" and more precisely in Chapter 5's treatment of ethos, but also the contention that what you say is somehow constituent of who you are. I next turn to the ways the culture of internet political talk, particularly political talk in opposition to both white evangelicalism and the Trump administration, activated this proposition and inverted it to argue that what you don't say is also evidence of who you are.

4.2.2 You Have to Say Something Because You Can

Here I make the contention that not only are my study participants using witness to conceptualize about their social media writing, but that their social media use affects how they think about witness. To make this argument, I review how users have, over the past fifteen years,

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[37] I gesture here toward discussions of identity construction online which I will address more fully in Chapter 5.

exploited the affordances of social media platforms to advance social movements, specifically those in which the many speak back to the powerful. The advent of update culture (Gallagher) gives other social media writers unprecedented opportunity to give feedback on a given post, the high emphasis on speech as political action intensifies debates about the correct way to speak about and advocate for a particular cause. But the social media activity and internet culture of 2020 revealed the shape of its own limitations. In particular, the events of that year underscored the message that the affordances of social media technologies not only shape what we are able to do, but what we believe about what we should do. Unprecedented opportunities for political speech have had profound implications on our cultural understanding of what constitutes political engagement and activism. Those new ideas and expectations have, in turn, shaped the conceptualizations of witness the social media writers in this study use for negotiating their rhetorical work online.

The low barrier to participation in a social media campaign expands opportunities for engagement, making it easy for vast numbers of people who have limited or no contact with on-the-ground organizers to express support for a given movement. During the 2010s, social media campaigns were instrumental to democratic movements around the world, with Twitter famously playing a central role in the Arab Spring; digital tools have also been used by disabled activists as a more accessible means of organizing and applying pressure that advances political goals (e.g., Mann, on the 2016 #CripTheVote campaign) and in the COVID-19 era as a safer alternative to in-person actions (see Dosani, "Digital Activism as a Tool"). Hashtags, often built around activist slogans, both collated relevant tweets for discussion and signaled to the algorithm that this was a hot topic driving user engagement; users exploited this affordance to get a particular subject or idea "trending" and gain greater attention and momentum for an interest or cause (Poell & van

Dijck).[38] As Michelle Zappavigna argues in *Social Semiotics,* hashtags operate as a kind of "social metadata" to both aggregate posts on a topic and introduce metacommentary on the subject under discussion. The tag serves to indicate the tweet's "aboutness" but also to "rhetorically imply that there is an ambient audience of microbloggers who agree with the point being made" (277). Metacommentary achieves significance particularly for users with private accounts whose posts would not be collected under public searches of a hashtag and on platforms like Facebook, which–in large part because of the large proportion of private accounts–users can but do not primarily navigate by using hashtags to find relevant content. But the structural, aggregative role is easy for users to exploit in order to get their content seen by more people–by tagging the post, they can pop up in the stream of posts fed to anyone who clicks on that tag. This is the logic that produces posts with dozens of hashtags below, many of which are of limited or no relevance to the content of the post. It's also the logic that affords and gives a name to the social media campaigns that punctuated the 2010s: "hashtag activism."[39]

The greater access to participation in political talk afforded by social media and the infrastructure of hashtag movements raised new ethical questions, which built during the Trump years to a fever pitch in 2020. If it's so easy to post your support for Black Lives Matter, or your

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[38] Algorithm-as-audience is one phenomenon that deserves more explicit attention than I offer it in this dissertation. As the logic of the algorithm invites users to produce a post not just because others might see it, but because it will "boost" the topic, social media writing of all kinds becomes a kind of open letter to the tech companies whose decisions frame our public discourse. While I see some indications–primarily on Twitter–that participants engage in this kind of writing, I focus here on writing for which the imagined audience emphasizes "real-life" friends and connections.

[39] Two significant such movements addressing white evangelicalism punctuate the years of the Trump administration: #ChurchToo (addressed in Chapter 3) and #EmptyThePews. These are outside the time frame of the study and the writers in this study did not, to my knowledge, participate; they are nonetheless a potent example of other forms of writing back that writers may have encountered on social media. Independent scholar and commentator Chrissy Stroop started the hashtag campaign #EmptyThePews after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, to collect and amplify the stories of those who had left their evangelical churches, and many who had deconverted, over "bigotry, intolerance, or [the 2016] election" of Donald Trump. The tweets using this hashtag included accounts of social media users who were condemned for their sexuality, women barred from church leadership, and a smaller number of posts calling out racism in the church and invoking the context of the white supremacist rally that provoked Stroop's initial call; Ruth Tsuria's study of the hashtag furthermore found that "words like abuse, trauma, survivor or descriptions of emotional reactions are used frequently" in the tweets in her sample.

denouncement of Trump's immigration policy, should everyone do it? And if you aren't doing it,

isn't it fair for us to assume you're on the opposing side? The idea that "silence is violence" has

been used by activist movements challenging abuses from sexual assault to gun violence and

international issues. Its circulation in 2020–often in the format of Instagram "social justice

slideshows" (Nguyen), tweets, protest signs, and other short-form genres–drew heavily on the work

of critical race theorists like Tema Okun on "white supremacy culture" and tools like the pyramid of

white supremacy,[40] which argues that white silence provides a permission structure for racism;

behaviors like "avoiding confrontation with racist family members" or "not challenging racist jokes"

are the foundations upon which more escalated forms of discrimination, calls for violence, violence

itself, and ultimately genocide are predicated.[41] This critique emerged in other meme-ified discourse

as well–for example, the phrase "your silence is deafening," quotations from Elie Wiesel ("neutrality

helps the oppressor") and Desmond Tutu ("if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have

chosen the side of the oppressor"), as well as tweets that followed the set up "if your pastor doesn't

preach about [political event or controversy] this Sunday, leave your church" (Tsuria).[42] At least one

participant explicitly referenced the ways that the idea that "silence is violence" shaped their

Facebook posting during the Trump years, reflecting on the pressure they felt to speak against the

high-profile injustices of each rapid news cycle.

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[40] To the best of my knowledge, the foremost visualization of the pyramid circulating on the internet comes from the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, a peace-building and human rights advocacy organization for Muslim and Jewish women. The graphic indicates that the tool is adapted from the work of Ellen Tuzzolo and the Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence; as with a good deal of digital material circulated and adapted by activist groups, it is difficult to confidently identify the original source.

[41] See Kachanoff et al. for review of anti-racist messages about white silence and white Americans' response.

[42] This frame appears in tweets from the Trump years, in particular, and in a number of tweets posted on or about January 6, 2021, deployed by Twitter users disappointed or concerned about a lack of response from their religious leaders to significant injustices and harms attributed to the Trump administration and Trump supporters and for those seeking to distance themselves from leaders who remained silent. It was so commonly used by more progressive or anti-Trump Christians, especially content creators, that in 2019 a pastor satirized it as self-promotion, tweeting: "If your pastor doesn't stand up on Sunday and address [insert buzzy topic I think he/she should address], then you should immediately leave your church, join my Facebook group, and subscribe to my spirituality podcast" (Fischer).

Like silence, statements make their poster available for critique–users have widespread

concerns about the authenticity and effectiveness of social media statements, and despite

impassioned debate, which have been critiqued as performative allyship (see Wellman) or

"slacktivism," evidence of insufficient commitment to the cause (Puplampu & MacPherson).

Insufficient commitment is an ethical problem; poor algorithmic literacy a more technical but

nonetheless significant one. Alongside the realities of algorithmic mediation, which differentially

rewards particular kinds of users, content, and rhetoric, the side effects of social movements that

scale rapidly online, and among users with limited literacy in the mechanics and strategy of social

change, can be significant. One such example is the #BlackOutTuesday of summer 2020, in which

users posted a black square, mostly on Instagram, to indicate their support for the Black Lives

Matter movement.[43] Many users originally captioned their posts #BlackLivesMatter, a hashtag that

linked directly to the BLM movement and its core assertions. However, the flood of posts

expressing support quickly turned the hashtag, which had collated posts with information about and

images from protests, into an undifferentiated wall of black squares. Some social media users

speculated that this was an attempt to sandbag the movement itself–had the initiative been sinister

or just ill-considered? Had someone started it in order to kill the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag as a

tool for organizing? The questions reflect real anxieties about the difficulty of identifying the source

of content online and a history in and beyond the 2016 election of coordinated uses of social media

to confuse citizens (see Linvill & Warren; Hao).

I hope I have established here the profound extent to which debates about how to speak on

issues of conviction, especially race, and the meaning of *not* speaking on those issues, animated all

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[43] One study participant tagged a post #BlackOutTuesday and several others posted about racial justice on the day of the campaign; my observations of social media posts and discussions on that day sparked some of the questions that culminated in this dissertation.

social media platforms during the period under review in this study and shaped the thinking of users engaged in political talk. I furthermore suggest that these legacies of hashtag activism, outflowing from Twitter to other platforms, operate as both background and contrast to the choices study participants ultimately made when framing their critiques of evangelical institutions, culture, and attitudes online. They activate the idea that what you say online–or don't say–not only reflects but also constitutes your identity, offering some overlap with evangelical traditions of witness; however, participants also resist, for themselves and their audiences, the idea that any user can be reduced to their social media profile. The contested norms of political talk online and the high visibility of debates like that around #BlackOutTuesday and "silence is violence," the concept and hashtag, spurred raised-evangelical study participants' robust reflections on how, when, and why they wanted to use their platforms on social media to speak about issues of conviction.

4.2.3 A Responsive Paradigm

It is, unfortunately, impossible to know exactly what my study participants saw on their social media feeds during the time period under investigation except those items that they shared on their own pages or explicitly mentioned in interviews–but I do have direct evidence in the posts and interview contributions collected for this study that writers drew on a wide range of material in their quest for new models for political engagement and political talk. These resources correspondingly inflected their conceptualization of witness. This included non-evangelical Christian traditions, primarily mainline Protestantism, including the Black church tradition, which shifts the emphasis from personal testimony to public theology or political vision as guiding touchstones, often using the qualifiers "public" or "social." "Prophetic" as a descriptor witness is likewise invoked in these contexts, though more narrowly to describe the work of rhetors calling out hypocrisy and calling back a people, institution, or nation to its loftiest principles (e.g., *Rhetoric Review* symposium,

"Frederick Douglass's Rhetorical Legacy"). Former evangelicals also contribute to the media environment these writers consume–figures who would not identify themselves as evangelical in 2020, but didn't fit neatly into any other boxes, either–who treated witness as a political category in the vein of Christians for Social Action, the originators of the "what would Jesus drive?" campaign referenced above. I also contend that for my participants, the distinctions between traditions and religious and secular source material are not that important–witness as it is dramatized in fictional courtroom proceedings is part of the ecology of meaning attached to the term, just as the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. are, and just as the popular meanings of the phrase "bearing witness" are.

Popular meanings of "witness" moreover share a common emphasis, according to scholarship on human rights rhetoric (e.g., Lyon & Olson), court proceedings (e.g., Stenberg on victim impact statements), and activist movements. These rhetorical traditions are, of course, distinct from one another in ways I cannot fully address in this dissertation. But I here invoke the term's consistent emphasis on truth gleaned from experience–what the rhetor has seen and heard–and the responsibility to speak regardless of outcome or even audience receptiveness. Witness as defined by scholars does not foreground persuasion; but rather making a way–or making visible a way–where there was none before. The rhetor may seek to move people, but bearing witness to one's own experiences and "creat[ing] a counter discourse" are greater preoccupations (Lyon & Olson 208). This low expectation of success has strong religious resonance, too: a prophet, as Luke 4:24 says, is rarely welcome in their own hometown. In reference to progressive evangelical Jim Wallis' 2005 bestseller *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It,* scholar Brian Jackson

coined the term "prophetic alchemy," to invoke both the transmutative goals of Wallis' rhetoric but also "the low likelihood of it actually working" (49).[44]

Having established that participants drew from the rhetorical resources of evangelicalism—and from other Christian traditions and cultural meanings of witness—to think about the problems of algorithm-mediated communication, and furthermore that the affordances of the platforms on which they did that writing shaped cultural expectations around political talk and subsequently participants' views of their responsibilities, I now move to make explicit how witness as a paradigm addresses the challenges of social media writing about issues of conviction. My contention here is that the paradigm of witness synthesized, for these writers, the tradition of their childhoods, the expectations of 2020 internet culture, and the many other rhetorics to which they were exposed online, religious and otherwise. Furthermore, witness addresses the tension between the two core beliefs about social media exhibited by my study participants—first, that social media is dangerous, and second, that growth is possible. These beliefs served as guideposts for the raised-evangelical writers in this study, activating their wariness and savvy while supporting a belief that their work could have some impact. In the next two sections, I explore these beliefs, before returning to three foci of witness that were of particular use to the writers in the study.

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[44] As the Biblical reference indicates, the possibility of persuasive failure is a fraught part of the tradition of witness, and perhaps not a popular one: Mark Allan Steiner used the key terms of this dissertation in 2009 when arguing that, evangelicals should adopt a model of witness that includes both "epistemological modesty" and a robust awareness of "the limits of persuasion." This is presented as a counterpoint to "long-running evangelical views about truth and persuasion that have tended to assume the passivity of the subjects responding to persuasive discourse" but also a model in line with tenets of the evangelical tradition. Steiner writes: "These limitations follow from a healthy respect for the volition of others to reject what rhetorical actors propose, and this is consistent with the traditional assumption of evangelical Christianity that human beings are active and significant moral agents who weigh evidence to decide the veracity of truth claims" (303). He also connects evangelical rhetorical failures to overconfidence in both medium (while the article predates social media's heyday, Steiner nods here to "contemporary electronic/digital media") and message (he explains a pro-life activist groups failure to change policy by its failure "even to engage in a rhetorical struggle with the American public either about its understanding of abortion or its understanding of Christianity" (304).)

4.3 Core Belief: Social Media is Dangerous, So We'll Set Boundaries

The ambivalence Tyler expressed about the platforms and his own engagement is widely shared among study participants and the general population, and the anxiety produced by uncertainty and controversy led many to pull back. The popularity of articles about social media detoxes (Syvertsen & Enli) or "sabbaths" (Paris et al.) as well as resolutions to limit screen time (Jenik) and time "wasted" online indicate that many Americans and other global users viewed and probably view their use of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, among other platforms, as a problem or an obstacle to the life they want. And it's not just viewed as bad for the users, but for society–a Pew Research Survey conducted July 2020 found that 64% of Americans believed "social media have a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the country today" (Auxier). The same survey, however, found that 23% of Americans say they've changed their view on a political or social issue because of what they saw on social media (Perrin). For the raised-evangelical writers who are the focus of this study, the tensions they experience tend to center on the (im)possibility of social media use as a vector for personal growth. To what extent is it possible to learn via social media to become more tolerant and compassionate, to grow in wisdom and understanding of one's faith? To what extent do Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and their algorithms necessarily train users toward small-mindedness, fear, outrage, and group think? What guides participants' decision-making as they navigate the complications of algorithmically-mediated discursive spaces online?

I turn here to the first of two significant beliefs that came through in this study's 26 interviews. The first belief is the conviction that social media is dangerous to society and to the individual if overused or used incorrectly, an anxiety reflected in Beck's ambivalence, recounted below, about how best to respond to "horrible opinions" and Tyler's concerns about echo chambers. The writers harbor some skepticism about social media, or at least a strong sense of its limitations as a vehicle for personal growth, democratic participation, and community well-being.

Tyler offers the 30,000 foot view and one response, which is to conclude that if it is impossible or at least unsustainable to use a platform in a way that supports his capacity to learn from and care for others, it's better to walk away from that platform; Alex, Ivy, and Anya, as well as Olivia and Gabe, below, show a wider spectrum of views on the negative factors that shape their social media engagement. I first review the operations of social media algorithms and scholarly assessments of their effects before turning more directly to the words of these participants.

4.3.1 The Unknowable Algorithm

Tyler's discomfort with Facebook extended from company strategy to the behavior the platform incentivized and the ways it led him to think about himself and his life. It also appears in his comments about echo chambers and his own attempts to resist the "target[ing]" of posts which so structures his mom's experience. The "less human" forces Tyler identified as structuring social media platforms are often collapsed and mythologized in popular discourse as "the algorithm," a catchall term for that illegible automated force that determines–in the context of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram–what posts the users see and who sees what they post. Writers in this study brought up the algorithm with a frequency that initially surprised me. Careful analysis of their comments and the rhetorical strategies evidenced in their posts confirmed prior scholarship around the unique features of online writing reviewed in this dissertation's introduction, including collapsed contexts, invisible audiences, the blurring of public and private (boyd), and "update culture," created by social networking's facilitation of writer's post-publication engagement and close-proximity, instantaneous opportunities for audience response (Gallagher). I further argued in that introduction that every update to a platform's algorithm places writers in a situation they have never had to navigate before. I emphasize here that those writers often don't know if or when the circumstances surrounding their social media writing have changed. In an algorithm-mediated rhetorical situation–one in which you

139

cannot know how what you are seeing online has been manipulated, and in which you cannot know who encounters the posts you produce, or even what factors influence those results–ambiguity is a defining feature, and writers cultivated theories of both social media and "writing back" that offered resources for navigating the uncertainty of their experiences online.

The algorithms deployed by social media companies serve several purposes–first, to show users content they want to see and engage in order to keep them on the site as long as possible, and second, to regulate posted content in ways that protect the company's reputation, legal standing, and bottom line. Twitter, for example, states (as of June 2023) that it filters out "Tweets from users you've blocked, NSFW content, and Tweets you've already seen" ("Twitter's Recommendation Algorithm"). Meta's "Transparency Center," viewed on the same date,[45] explains their approach to determining which of all possible posts a user will see in their feed upon pulling up Facebook–it assesses posts based on "signals" including "who posted it; how you have previously interacted with that person; whether it's a photo, a video, a link; and how popular the post is based on things like how many of your Friends liked it, Pages that re-shared it, etc.," and makes predictions about each post's relevance to the individual user ("Our Approach"). This is how the platform knows to show me posts from groups of which I am a member, or photos from a wedding my college roommate attended, as opposed to content shared by users to whom I have no connection or even high-profile figures like professional athletes–I don't follow sports–or actors from shows I don't watch. Algorithms also serve users advertisements based on many of the same criteria. Tim Hwang argues that digital advertising is "the beating heart of the internet": tech companies make their money based

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[45] My viewing of these pages took place in 2023, after substantial changes had been made to both algorithms–Elon Musk had, for example, purchased Twitter and introduced premium subscription services that helped users achieve prominence on the site. The basic information identified here about which inputs each algorithm considers seems to remain static over time, even if the weighting of those algorithms is constantly tweaked.

on the presumption that the many data points they have about internet users–provided, often, by the user's social media activity–can be monetized through targeted advertising (*Subprime Attention Crisis*).

Scholars know, however–as does, increasingly, the public–that algorithms are not neutral, and they do far more than spit out relevant posts and ads. Two features of algorithmic mediation generate particular critique: first, the decisions made by the platform about what to prioritize, and second, the datasets on which those algorithms are trained. Researchers and journalists have repeatedly demonstrated that platforms use a wide variety of methods to reduce the visibility of some kinds of content, including scam posts and explicit content as well as some political views, and boost content that aligns with their business strategy. Content regulation is a contentious issue on these platforms as it has historically been in their analog counterparts–the line between protecting users from misinformation and suppressing free speech, or between tolerating a range of viewpoints and platforming dangerous conspiracy theorists, remains a subject of impassioned debate. And it's not just the guiding principles, but the formulas themselves–scholars like Safiya Noble, for example, have argued compellingly that algorithms reinforce social oppression. People may think, and in fact be encouraged to think, of the automated mathematical formulas and large datasets as "benign, neutral, or objective," the people who build them hold a wide range of values and biases that are only amplified in and through them (Noble 1). Noble describes this in the language of "technological redlining" and "algorithmic oppression," analyzing cases where Google's search results reinforced racist stereotypes about Black women and its automated facial recognition identified photos of Black people, including then-First Lady Michelle Obama, as apes. When criticized, the company maintained that it "was not responsible for its algorithm," Noble reports (6).

The challenge for companies, if they are assumed to be operating in good faith, is that even decisions that seem innocuous can produce devastating results when deployed at scale. See, for

141

example, Facebook's decision in 2016 to "pivot to privacy," prioritizing content from users'

Facebook friends and promoting groups with the hopes of increasing user engagement. This move

has been repeatedly criticized for facilitating the spread of conspiracy theories about the COVID-19

pandemic and radicalizing users by recommending, based on their interests, other groups advancing

increasingly fringe political viewpoints (Jankowicz). YouTube, too, has been charged with funneling

users toward alt-right content through algorithmic recommendations of what to watch next (Basu).

This history and the algorithm's opacity raises the specter of that influence being put to sinister,

even persecutory use; for example, influencers and politicians complain about being

"shadowbanned," an accusation that social media platforms are "quietly suppressing their activity on

the site" and making it harder for other users to see or even find (Nicholas). Political radicalization is

not the only problem–changes to algorithms can result in significant losses of views, followers, and

revenue for smaller and newer creators and therefore consolidating market power to better-

resourced accounts. Like Facebook's earlier "pivot to video," Instagram's 2022 promotion of Reels,

short videos designed to compete with TikTok, produced backlash in part because small businesses,

ill-equipped to produce this new kind of content, saw huge drops in engagement and sales (Hughes).

Getting clicks and pageviews–whether they're from folks who are interested in the content, who are

eager to comment on it, or who are "hate-watching" or "hate-following" an account–drives most

content websites, despite its flaws as a metric for understanding even user tastes (Zhou et al.) The

companies behind our "attention economy" amplify content that keeps users active on the platform,

even if the users themselves report that they don't like what they see and they know that stuff isn't

good for them (Rathje et al.).

4.3.2 The Algorithm as It Is Experienced

Users know that the algorithm is at work, but it's very difficult to know more than the broad shape of its effect on one's own feed and, correspondingly, one's psyches. We just know we're not seeing the same stuff as other people except when we are. "Algorithmic selectiveness" tends to frustrate as well as confuse social media users, who have reported concerns about a loss of "societal common ground" (Gagrčin et al.). Among my study participants, there was particular anxiety about the weak or polluted information diet others were consuming–see Tyler's comment, above, about his mom getting her news from Facebook–but they also expressed that they weren't sure if they could trust their analysis of what was happening online. Their awareness of algorithmic influences left them struggling to assess the popularity of a given perspective or the tone and temperature of public discourse about politics and social issues. Changes over time were particularly opaque: Christy, for example, expressed that at the time of our first interview in late winter 2022 that "I feel like I see fewer political posts on my timeline" but "I don't know if that's an algorithm thing or if it's that my conservative friends are posting less." Kelly offered the same perspective, struggling to compare the amount of political content on Facebook at the time of her interview relative to the Trump years. She wondered, too, if her choices to "mute stories" on Instagram or "snooze" content from specific Facebook friends had impacted the accuracy of her sense of what was really happening online, and therefore her ability to respond effectively to the ideas she encountered there. The lack of shared reference points felt particularly acute during 2020, when many offline experiences were significantly curtailed; as folks relied more on social media for interaction with others and a gauge of their communities, it became "very easy, I think, if you thought differently [from people around you] to feel like you were crazy or wrong or an outsider," in Beth's words. What's actually going on out there? Have they lost their minds, or have I?

Almost all of the writers expressed not only frustration with social media, but concern about the impact of social media on their communities or on themselves. Many indicated that they limited

or put guardrails on their use of social media specifically in order to maintain healthy relationships, whether that be to invest less time online and more time with loved ones, to limit their access to the behaviors and viewpoints their loved ones expressed online, or both. The writers seemed to believe instinctively that reducing their exposure would help them resist the urge to reduce people to their bad opinions or otherwise help them manage their own irritation and be kind to those people in "real life." In an anecdote that receives more attention later in this chapter, Olivia says in the Facebook post reviewed later in this chapter that she unfollows people whose content she finds disrespectful, "even if they're family," setting boundaries on her social media use and prioritizing content that she feels challenges and influences her in positive ways. This practice is somewhat in keeping with research that suggests that awareness of differing opinions leads people to pull back from possible conflict (Hampton, Shining & Liu). If it's true that the more you know about a friend's opinions from social media, the less likely you are to engage in person, reducing social media engagement about those opinions might foster more robust in-person dialogue. It might also just keep your nervous system from going on high-alert. This long passage from Gabe, who speaks particularly to his experience as a pastor in training debating with other pastors online over the years of the Trump administration:

> Around 2018, we were getting ready to have a kid. And I was just angry. I was just angry all the time, and I knew that that wasn't healthy. So I started unfollowing certain people; I ignore comments from certain people now–like, I just don't respond to them at all. And that really ramped up in the summer of 2020, with everything–like lockdowns and mandates, and I was getting into it with pastors, especially… And so I was just letting loose, and getting back into that place of just being upset and angry all the time, and so–I never, like, shut off my social media. I didn't go, like, long breaks or anything like that. But I just started kind of making these unofficial rules about like, we're just not going to talk to this person anymore,

because they only ever tick you off, and that's affecting–it was affecting who I was at work, it

was affecting how I was with my baby, like–and I really didn't want that to be my whole life.

Like, just being upset all the time.

As Gabe's account indicates, the boundaries are made and remade over time as personal and

sociopolitical circumstances change; the intensification of digital life during COVID-19 lockdowns–

a period during which screen time increased for many Americans, "Zoom fatigue" entered the

public lexicon, and many reported feeling less close to friends and family (McClain et al.)–challenged

the disciplines he had set up to support his well-being. There is, of course, no way for this study to

speak comparatively about raised-evangelical social media users who write back versus other groups

of users, but it is nonetheless notable that members of the study population expressed deep

ambivalence about social media as both an influence on their personal lives and on the collective, be

that collective framed as evangelicalism, Christians in general, another kind of community, or a

political unit. Gabe continued to post regularly on Facebook through the study period and through

the time of writing, but wrestled with the multidirectional impacts of his social media use.

Uncertainty about how the realities of the algorithm might turn well-intentioned messages to

negative ends troubled some users, who made comments haunted by the idea that "silence is

violence," even as they struggled to speak in ways that achieved their goals. Beck, who mainly used

Twitter during the study's focal period, invoked the truism that the algorithm rewards engagement–

given that assumption about the platform, they wondered when and how responses to those posts

actually served their rhetorical purpose. "There's the argument that says don't reply at all because

that's what the algorithm wants and then it boosts engagement," Beck said about their Twitter use:

But sometimes it's important to make sure that horrible stuff doesn't just get said with no

rebuttal. 'Cause then it gives the impression that this stuff is approved. So yeah, that's always

a battle. When do you reply, when are you just boosting a horrible opinion for no reason?

When is it important to say the thing, even though it does give some attention to the

horrible opinion?

Beck further reported that they chose to engage in hopes not that the original account owner would

see their reply, but that other viewers who encountered the original tweet would read it. This was

particularly true for their tweets replying to Republican senators like Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) and

Marco Rubio (R-FL), whose habit of tweeting out Bible verses seemed to Beck hypocritical.[46] To

Beck, someone like a senator or megachurch pastor was "already amplified," so it was worth

responding so that other people who saw the tweet might also see replies and realize the critique

"makes more sense than the original post." But that calculus wasn't the same for small-time Twitter

users. In fact, they used an extension known as Bot Sentinel that employed its own algorithm to

identify and rate Twitter accounts engaging in disruptive behavior, highlighting in red any posts

from accounts it designated likely bots or trolls. If Beck saw red text, they didn't engage.

The use of a Chrome extension to filter accounts was an unusual case, and Beck is somewhat

unique among the study participants in their exclusive use of Twitter during the study period, a

platform with a more robust and public history of fake accounts.[47] Because Twitter is a platform on

which users frequently follow or see in their feeds statements by public figures, their differentiation

of strategies for high-profile users and everyday users is largely platform-specific–yet over the latter

part of the decade, social media platforms increasingly mirrored one another in functionality (Yao),

and the norms and strategies that proved successful on one site often eventually appeared on other

sites as well; scholars have, for example, used hashtag activism as a frame for activity on Instagram

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[46] For example, when Loeffler posted the text of Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," Beck replied to the tweet by invoking allegations that the senator had used early knowledge of the COVID-19 virus and economic impacts of the coming pandemic to sell retail stocks and invest in medical equipment companies, all while downplaying the threat of COVID-19 in her public statements (Burns). Had Christ strengthened her to do that?

[47] See reporting and scholarship on the Internet Research Agency, Russia's "troll factory" seeking to disrupt Black Lives Matter organizing, influence U.S. elections, and advance pro-Russian sentiment (e.g. Bastos & Farkas).

as well, including right-wing movements like anti-vaccination (Kim et al.) and the #BlackOutTuesday initiative discussed below (Wellman). Perhaps because of this convergence and the rhetorical slippage around terms like "social media," the folk beliefs about how the platform operates were platform-agnostic–my participants considered how the algorithm might be operating to influence what they saw on social media and weighed that in their approach to dealing with problematic ideas or posts, invoking the accumulative logic of hashtag activism regardless of platform. Discussion of endorsement and amplification–language that resonated across platforms–is largely reserved for the next chapter, but I introduce Beck's interview comments here to indicate their awareness of how algorithms might turn a critique meant to diminish an argument into fuel for that argument's wider distribution. In several cases, writers commented directly on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram about their concerns about how the affordances of social media platforms were negatively impacting them, their communities, and the relationships that make them up. We will return to this theme with profiles of Olivia and Christy, which evidence the practice of modeling and advocating information literacy as a practice of integrity in social media use.

4.4 Core Belief: Growth is Possible, So We'll Keep Posting

The writers are motivated, in the comments made above and in their forthcoming case studies below, by concerns about the dangers of social media and its potentially wide-ranging harmful effects not only on individual psyches, but on the skills and values that support thriving communities. However, they also often invoke another central assumption, which also constitutes the second significant belief I encountered among study participants. Participants expressed and enacted the belief that social media can serve a valuable formative purpose, to which writers sometimes testify with stories of their own growth via online exposure to unfamiliar ideas and perspectives. Users can learn new information from social media, of course, but the desire to post

147

also comes from the assumption that the persuasive force of social media might be leveraged for positive ethical formation, leading those same users to treat others with greater kindness and respect, to develop anti-racist attitudes, and to engage in prosocial behaviors. This is, in some ways, the legacy of mass awareness-raising campaigns categorized above as hashtag activism; it has its own resonances in evangelical traditions of text-based moral formation or self-improvement through reading, which has wider cultural purchase. For many of the writers in this study, the belief in social media's potential positive impact, or–more precisely–the belief that social media's persuasive force might be turned to positive ends–carries an implication of moral obligation, by virtue of ethics or group membership, to say or do something. I have already reviewed in this chapter how social media users have exploited the affordances of social media for more prosocial activist movements and how those same affordances have contributed to shifting ideas of how users should engage in political talk online, as well as the obligation to do so. I turn now to my participants' slightly different take on social media's formative capacities and the lessons they offer on how to influence others online.

4.4.1 The Internet is for Learning

I have already discussed the wariness that Tyler, with whom this chapter begins, expressed about social media companies. But the comments with which the chapter opened also characterize social media platforms as a site of learning and growth. His efforts to curate his own feed and expose himself to a wide range of ideas and perspectives assumes that he sees social media at least in part as a valuable resource for his own learning and understanding. And he was not the only writer who reported that the content they encountered on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the wider internet shaped their political and religious views in what they saw as positive ways. Ivy, for example, likewise spoke about a trans' friends' Facebook activity which has "educated me on trans rights, the trans life experience, and really given me a lot of capacity for compassion that I wouldn't have had

before." As with Olivia's comments in the post about algorithms reviewed above, Kelly spoke about her use of Facebook and Instagram as tools to get a "pulse" on what her friends think and feel about what's happening in the world; she also tries to follow accounts and users who deepen her understanding and help her to "have more grace for people and more compassion for people around me" who have strong views.

Writers also invoked this belief in discussions of their own social media production, drawing a relationship between personal experiences of social media and their hopes for how the platform might operate similarly for their readers. Ivy told me she wrote back to her white evangelical home community because of experiences like those with her trans friend's posts: "people on Facebook really did change my mind. I understand that I may not change someone's mind at all in any of these conversations, but I also may not just change their mind today." Writers suggested that the possibility of growth–the growth they've personally experienced, and the growth they therefore hope for others–shaped expectations for audience engagement and motivated them to make posts in the absence of visible feedback or engagement metrics such as likes, comments, or retweets. Anya, for example, reports that "you never know what's gonna stick"– her motivation to share content about the history of race in America or commentary about white evangelical hypocrisy comes from her own experiences of learning and "anti-racist self-work." She credits the narratives her Black high school classmates shared on social media about their experiences of discrimination as a catalyst for much of that development:

> I know so much of my own growth has been just reading the posts of people that I knew, and understanding their perspectives on all of those things and taking in just like some of all those–of all that information, and learning and growing and applying. So when I was posting, I wasn't expecting to go viral or like, like, be the thought piece of the day on Facebook or whatever. But just another voice in the chorus.

149

Even if no one engaged with her posts about racial justice issues–or at least, not in the visible way of reaction buttons, comments, or shares–Anya felt that her writing was still a valuable contribution and took a positive view. She might not have the necessary information to know if it "worked," but she knew, at least, that she could provide "another data point for [white evangelical social media connections] to consider."

Several writers often spoke about the possibility of persuasion with careful hedging, and with a long view–rather than trying to bring a childhood friend's parent around to expressing full-fledged support for the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, the writer might seek to communicate that there are faithful Christians who support it. Anya's comments about her own learning and posting also underscore a thread across the interviews: both reports of participants learning from social media and their hope for persuasion revolved around the personal appeal–a personal narrative, perhaps, but also someone they knew in real life who was putting forward a particular viewpoint or belief. These statements call back to interview excerpts I cited in this dissertation's introduction, wherein writers invoked the idea that they might be the only friend or acquaintance on a particular person's social media feed representing a particular viewpoint or perspective. Alex holds onto the possibility of impact from what he might call necessity–Facebook sometimes feels like the only available path of influence:

> There are certainly comments from white evangelicals that would make me say–am I actually achieving anything here? Because it sure doesn't feel it. Particularly if we're circling the same discussion point again and again. But I think that I continue to do it out of both a hope that it'll do something, and… what other platform do I have?

4.5 Witness in Action

That circumscribed hope for change, and the commitment to engage anyway, bring us back to witness as a model for algorithm-mediated political talk, for which I draw from rhetorical and religious studies scholarship and from the work of my participants. In my sketch of this model, I emphasize three features–integrity, flexibility, and accumulation–to develop my argument that the writers in this study are in fact invoking this rhetorical tradition not only in the writing that they do (more on that in later chapters), but also in the ways they think about that writing in algorithm-mediated online spaces. My interest here is less in theorizing a specific and distinct definition for witness, but to lay out the foci that make it a useful category for these rhetors, who seek to testify to their own experience, address unknowable audiences with uncertain success, and trust that while their voice is needed, they are not alone.

4.5.1 Flexibility: Witness Accommodates Uncertain Audiences and Uncertain Returns

Here I trouble the academic impulse toward definition by arguing that the rhetorical tradition of witness was a valuable resource for the writers in my study specifically because of its loose and varied significations. Their awareness of the algorithm's influence left the writers unable to fully trust their assessment of the behavior and ideas they saw circulating online, as discussed above in "The Algorithm as It Is Experienced," and ambivalence about the nature of the disagreement–misguided, or malicious?–confounded persuasive attempts.[48] The paradigm of witness, however, accommodated their uncertainty about audiences and the frequent reality that they were wrong. The miscalculations centered around audience, a common theme in the research as well (Litt & Hargittai): the people to whom they thought they intended to write may or may not actually have

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[48] See Chapter 3's definitions of white evangelicalism for discussion of this tension in how this study's raised-evangelicals thought about their audiences.

seen the post, the need to post was stronger than their idea of who it was for, or they realized after that a post ostensibly directed at white evangelicals was really about commiserating with others who were likewise aggrieved, including others raised in white evangelicalism who had left it behind, or non-evangelical others to whom they were–like Ivy, above–trying to demonstrate a different kind of Christianity. But because witness turned on the convictions of the speaker, rather than the effectiveness of their persuasion, it could be counted successful, satisfying, or both, regardless of audience response.

For the raised-evangelical writers in my study, going "on record" or making a public statement of their own belief served to disrupt the perceived correspondence of Christian religious affiliation and conservative politics. Posts like this accomplish multiple purposes, and different ones for different audiences, so it worked well enough for whoever the algorithm happened to serve it to: it signals to politically conservative white evangelicals that their views are not the only possible Christian perspective, and it might provide moderate Christians encouragement to consider other perspectives on what it means to live out their faith. In his first interview, Alex told me that, "even if I can gently poke occasionally" at views he sees as misaligned with the teachings of Jesus–"it at least makes me feel like I'm doing something to make a difference in those communities that I feel are doing harm." Furthermore, pushing back on right-wing evangelical talking points and representing alternative viewpoints as legitimate positions for a person of faith "at least give non-Christians a hope that not all Christians are lunatics." Ivy and Alex here lay out some tensions around the obligation invoked by the possibility of persuasion–if they believe their posts can change people, shouldn't they give it everything they've got? And yet the rhetorical tradition of witness absorbs this tension as well. By imagining their writing in these terms, they can release ultimate responsibility for the decisions and behaviors of others, leaving the results in divine hands.

Witness's emphasis on the experience of the rhetor and the independent value of bearing witness, regardless of who is listening or whether it works, aligns better with participant statements about their goals and motives than does the more obviously persuasive paradigm of proselytization. Ivy, in particular, spoke at length about how she differentiates her rhetorical activity now from her experiences as a trainee with an evangelistic music ministry, which eventually led her to step away from worship-leading and church entirely for several years. She described her experiences as a young adult in professional ministry as exploitative; leaders used the message that the success of ministry, including the spiritual well-being and salvation of others, depended on her commitment to the work, so she couldn't step back or take a break. After that experience, Ivy did her best to avoid an "evangelical" approach to posting on social media; she consciously resisted proselytizing as a paradigm for posting about her political and religious convictions: "I will never again try to make this my job or responsibility in this world and think that I need to save the world through Facebook," she said. Instead, she adopted a more circumscribed view of her agency and influence, invoking self-expression ("you can post your opinion") and civil discourse ("opening a good dialogue") with the idea that she "may learn something from them" too. Ivy held onto the belief above that people can and do change their minds for the better because of ideas they encounter on social media, so speaking about her own values and convictions was still worth doing–while she didn't take responsibility for saving people from their misguided beliefs, she did want "to see if I can make a difference."

4.5.2 Accumulation: Witness Does Not Depend on the Rhetor

For writers like Ivy and Alex, some further comfort might be sourced from the pattern of sharing, or amplifying, the posts of other dissenters, which I discuss further in Chapter 5. That "writing back" strategy connects Ivy, Alex, and other participants to a wider network of social media

users who share concerns and convictions and are doing similar work to advance them–what some might call "a great cloud of witnesses" (from Hebrews 12:1). Anya's comments about being a "voice in the chorus" (see "The Internet is for Learning") resonate here, too. Though a writer could be motivated by the idea that they might be the only person in a specific person's life to bear witness to a particular perspective or ideal, or that they as a trusted or known voice advocated for that position, they could also be confident that others were making similar points and seeding similar ideas–or, to extend the choral metaphor: you might be the only one singing a melody that's recognizable to the hearer, but there are other harmonizing voices singing supporting parts elsewhere on and offline. Accumulation as an emphasized feature of witness also aligns most cleanly with the logic of the algorithm, which writers understood to amplify content based on engagement. While many writers used the accumulative logic more loosely, understanding that they were planting seeds they might not harvest–to use a Biblical metaphor–others more directly invoked the idea that the more interaction users had with a given post, the more widely seen the post would be.

Beck was one of these users; their comments about responding to high-profile figures on Twitter appeared in "The Algorithm as It Is Experienced," above. Gabe, also a Twitter user but whose "writing back" took place primarily on Facebook, likewise employed this logic in his approach to COVID-19 misinformation on his Facebook feed. He thought about sharing posts from other pages as a form of engagement that boosted the original post in Facebook's algorithm, spreading it perhaps to his own Facebook friends but also in Facebook's wider user base–so he regularly shared news articles and statistics about COVID-19 cases in his area, stories from frontline medical staff, and information from doctors and hospital pages about preventing transmission of the virus, even though he didn't get much response:

> Even if nobody reads the post that I share on my page, by sharing it, I'm still spreading it to
> more people because Facebook is going to pick up on, "Oh, people are clicking on this–we

should get it out there. I hate this phrase now, but I wanted to amplify the voices of the

people who knew what they were talking about.

Gabe reports that his beliefs about how the algorithm works directly influence the choices he makes

to post and repost particular content. It also suggests a widened understanding of rhetoric in an

algorithm-mediated rhetorical situation, operating on both a platform level and an individual one.

Gabe acknowledges that the algorithm itself is a persuasive force that acts on him and other

Facebook users, but a force that is responsive to feedback; his own rhetorical work is seeding that

algorithm with the kind of ideas he wants to spread. He votes with his own engagement for the

content he values, from trustworthy information about the effectiveness of mask-wearing to

interpretations of the Bible that affirmed women's leadership. In so doing, he invokes a theory of

persuasion by accumulation that resonates with but does not absolutely adopt the logic of hashtag

activism. Gabe adds a voice to the chorus, in Anya's words; he seeks to offer one of any number of

posts that start to seed an idea, counterbalance a false claim, or diversify the range of perspectives

some personal connection or even anonymous user encounters in their feed. It's a strategy that

appeals to ethos–it may matter to some readers that it is Gabe who shared this perspective; he may

convince them by virtue of his character–and also elides the individual rhetor by placing them

among many others, particularly those "people who knew what they were talking about," in the

conversation, broadly construed, that is taking place online.

4.5.3 Integrity: Witness Begins with the Rhetor

The third feature of the model of witness I sketch here is far from third in importance.

While the other two features of witness identified in this chapter, flexibility and accumulation, are

functions, integrity provides something more like the architecture of witness–content and form.

Participants invoked integrity both as a guide for their own lives and as a metric by which white

evangelicalism and white evangelicals had fallen short. The very idea that every consumer, sexual, and political choice should reflect one's most sincere beliefs and values is, in many ways, precisely what provoked their desire to "write back" to their home communities and critique mainstream white evangelicalism. After a lifetime of hearing that a good Christian should be careful about the music they listen to, avoid elevating celebrities and politicians as idols, and beware the biases of secular news media, the prevalence of inconsistent values application and conspiracy thinking felt to many more like a willful choice than a problem of information literacy. Much has been made, for example, of the contrast between evangelical responses to President Bill Clinton's infidelity and sexual assault allegations and their later treatment of Donald Trump's.

That suspicion of willful choice fueled some of the more anger-motivated posts in the dataset, according to interviewees–and yet, their desire to express integrity shaped not only these outbursts of principle, but also their more audience-inflected work. In a moment where silence on one's social media accounts might be viewed by more progressive audiences as complicity in any number of evils, these writers also–because of their identity as raised-evangelical Christians–had access to audiences that (as their own evolutions suggested) included at least some movable members. An emphasis on integrity allowed them to distance themselves from the hypocrisy of white evangelical institutions and leaders (see Chapter 3), to critique, however obliquely, what they saw as wrong in the church and in the world, and to draw on their own experiences (more on that in Chapter 5) to advance those messages. It also enabled them to reconstitute a Christianity to which they wanted to bear witness; an identity marked by consistent values and greater tolerance of difference (more on this in Chapter 6).

Alignment between belief and behavior was, of course, one of the key resources of integrity from which participants drew; alignment between expertise and public comment was another. Anya spoke about this in our first interview, suggesting that she chose to comment on topics on which

she had some earned authority and affected communities to which she felt some intimate responsibility. She used Facebook to post her "big thoughts," in fact only logging on when she felt she had something to say. If she felt that there was already good discussion underway, or if someone more personally impacted was speaking about an issue, she piped down–

> But if I start feeling very convicted, that there's something at the intersection of who I am just as someone who's, you know, left conservative republicanism, is a woman, is someone who does interfaith dialogue, who used to live in [Eastern Europe], whatever that intersection is–if I feel like my experience has something to say at that intersection, then I'll [post or comment in response].

This is, for Anya, also related to race, and the relative judgment that she's done enough of her homework on anti-Black racism that she has some grounds to speak to other white people about issues that surround it, and she also has the "receipts" of what she was told growing up and why it's wrong. If she didn't see enough "white Southern ladies speaking up on something," she got involved, in part because of her belief that "sometimes it's important for white people to see white people aligning with the Black community and speaking up for them." So it's about acting on her convictions when she can do so with credibility, and it's also about "debuting" how she has changed, so folks know what she stands for.

Integrity operated both as a tool for participants deciding what to speak up about, and also as a guide for when and how to respond to posts or comments with which they disagreed. Ivy offers one example of this in her account of an experience she had after posting a meme about reproductive rights. She received a comment on that post arguing that using any method of birth control was disobedient to God's commands, and decided to push back–mostly for the guy who commented, but also for overhearers who are skeptical of Christianity or Christians:

157

when I see stuff like this, there's a part of me that feels like, okay, I kind of feel like I need to set the record straight, because we can say not all Christians all day long, but if there's not someone out there being the not-all-Christians person, it's not going to make a difference. You can say, not all Christians, you can say, not all cops, you can say, not all white people, but if you're not being that difference, you can't distinguish the difference. So I like to reply to things like this, because I like being able to show people the contrast that there are other versions of Christianity, other versions of Christians who don't ascribe to whatever this is, and don't believe this way and think that this is absurd and wrong. And, what's the word I'm looking for? Not just impolite. Irreverent. Honestly, I feel like irreverent is a good word for it.

Ivy's note about multiple audiences echoes the "flexibility" feature of witness as a paradigm for thinking, as well as integrity. She draws parallels to the #NotAllMen hashtag, which arose after the 2014 Isla Vista killings and perpetrator Elliot Rodgers' racist and misogynistic manifesto outlining his goal to wage war against women who did not pay sexual attention to him (Medina; Solnit). The hashtag, often used satirically, argued that some men may be like Rodgers, but not all of them. It was countered by #YesAllWomen, a hashtag wherein women social media users argued that even if not every man exhibits misogynistic behavior, including harassment and discrimination, all women experience it; saying "not all men are like that" often serves to minimize harmful experiences and exempt the speaker from responsibility. Ivy's use of the parallel implies her belief that if you want to argue that "not all Christians" behave or believe like her anti-birth control commenter, you also have to be willing to publicly represent their contrasting views and model alternative behaviors. Asserting a truth involves backing it up with your behavior, she suggests, all but echoing the rhetorical traditions in which she had been raised.

4.6 Profiles

I conclude this chapter with two participant profiles, which serve throughout this dissertation both to triangulate analysis of participants' interview comments with direct engagement of their social media writing–and to evidence or extend the arguments of each chapter. Here, I extend–as witness operates as a model through which participants make decisions about their social media writing–what, when, how, and why to post–its features appear also in their arguments. In the first, Olivia directly engages the persuasive force of the algorithm and models how others might reconstitute their social media environments, and a second in which Christy addresses conspiracy thinking. Both cases invoke the two core beliefs about social media outlined in this chapter and argue for a kind of critical information literacy, in which the consumption and amplification of credible information undergirds their own and others' credibility as Christians.

These posts exemplify a pattern I identified across the range of study participants: raised-evangelical social media writers seek to model and spread pro-social and pro-democratic participation in their geographical communities and digital networks. They also notably differ from many of the strategies deployed under the banner of hashtag activism–they do not primarily seek to signal that the writer is part of a larger movement of concerned people, as Zappavigna argued hashtags facilitate; they do not invoke the majority as a source of moral weight. In response to their awareness of algorithmic influences and amplified misinformation and disinformation, participants leaned on practices of personal integrity–to use social media in ways that foster their own growth and well-being, to make that behavior explicit, and to advocate for its wider adoption.

4.6.1 Olivia: An SEO Professional on Algorithms

A June 2020 post on Olivia's Facebook page begins as follows: "long but important PSA from a professional regarding social media: did you know every social media platform _especially

Facebook and Instagram (which is owned by Facebook) _works by using algorithms?" In this post, which clocks in over 300 words and includes photos showing a step by step how-to, Olivia explains to her friends that algorithms use the data of a user's social media activity to inform what they show that user, serving up similar content to what the user has already engaged–which might make it seem to that person as if their own opinions and preferences are normative and widely shared. Then, she explains why she's concerned about the impact of algorithms: as a Christian, mom, member of an ideologically diverse church congregation, and "daughter to parents from a different generation," she feels strongly that she should both expose herself to a lot of different viewpoints and prioritize "content that is kind and humble." So, she says, she unfollows accounts that post maliciously "even if I agree… even if they're family," and follows accounts that "make me think, help me learn, and show me a new perspective." She uses the accompanying screenshots to demonstrate how to mute a Facebook account from your feed or follow, "see first,"–tell the algorithm to prioritize–and get notifications from a given page. She follows up below the post with a comment that shares a selection of her favorite sources, carefully including both an outspoken conservative Facebook friend, the page Good Black News, and an organization that trains "interracial bridge builders" in Christian communities.

Here, Olivia makes an explicit argument that her curatorial practices on social media stem from her religious commitments. She also invokes a number of identities rhetorically–not only does she cite her work in communications, which gives her the authority from which to make an informational announcement about how social media platforms operate, but she lists traits that are widely shared by her Facebook friends. If you, too, are a Christian, a mother, a church-goer, and/or a child of parents–a category that covers everyone–it follows that you should adopt these principles. You, too, should curate your feeds carefully, reflect on how your social media use is shaping your perceptions of others, consider multiple perspectives and the limits of your own. With a few dozen

likes, two shares, and a handful of supportive comments, Olivia's message widely telegraphs her

dissatisfaction with vitriolic, snide, or irresponsible online behavior and norms a more reflective

approach to social networking as well as greater tolerance for disagreement; she furthermore pushes

back on the indeterminate power of the algorithm by taking active part in deciding what she wants

to see or doesn't: "Acts of personal news curation on social media have the potential to balance,

counteract, or complement other mechanisms of content curation such as algorithmic filtering or

social curation" per scholar Lisa Merten ("Block, Hide, or Follow"). If a sympathetic reader were to

follow the steps Olivia laid out, for example, the content they consume online might significantly

change, and their own online behavior alongside it.

4.6.2 Christy: An Academic Advocating Research

In 2020, a wide range of viral conspiracy theories circulated in white evangelical networks,

from misleading reports associated with protests against police brutality to false stories about the

origin, treatment and spread of COVID-19 (Bloom & Rollings). One of the most potent, receiving

several responses from members of my study population, played on long-standing evangelical

discourse about sex trafficking. These concerns and the associated networks of information and

ostensible support for victims were activated by far-right rhetoric about pedophilia and other forms

of child abuse–see the "Pizzagate" incident in which a gunman entered a restaurant to liberate

children from what he believed to be a trafficking ring run by the Clintons from the establishment's

non-existent basement (Fisher et al.). Christy took an "explainer" approach in her response to posts

circulating on her Facebook feed about the trafficking of children. "Alright, folks," she begins,

already sounding a little tired:

> I've seen posts from many of you lately concerning human trafficking… I understand the
>
> desire to do good, to protect children, and to end sexual exploitation. But it is important to

know that this wave of moral concern relies on numbers that have been pulled practically

out of thin air, emphasize very rare forms of exploitation (focusing on stranger danger

abductions of very young children rather than, say, homeless gay teens forced to trade sex

for shelter), and that followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory are using this panic to

attract people to their dangerous ideology. I'd encourage you to listen to the two episodes on

trafficking by the You're Wrong About podcast (https://apple.co/3ld7LBC and

https://bit.ly/3l53KyW). They dig into the numbers in a really helpful way and explain how

organizations use "raising awareness" as code for "doing nothing to solve the problem." You

can read up on QAnon's ties to nationwide Save Our Children rallies here: [link].

Like Olivia, Christy begins with an assumption of goodwill. She doesn't even say, outright, that the

claims her Facebook friends are making or sharing are false. She leaves that to the other sources

shared–the NBC article, the most immediately accessible of the resources she's distributing, begins

its outline of the relationship of the #SaveOurChildren campaign and QAnon by establishing the

latter as "a sprawling and baseless conspiracy theory alleging that President Donald Trump is

engaged in a secret war against a cabal of Satanist child abusers in government, entertainment and

the media" which has been linked to "several violent crimes" (Zadrozny & Collins). In fact, her

approach here–to respond to conspiracy theory talking points by sharing two podcast episodes and

an article and encouraging people to look into it–echoes pervasive right-wing rhetoric around "doing

one's own research" rather than believing what you're told, a catchphrase that picked up later in the

year particularly around the COVID-19 vaccine series (Chinn & Hasell). She communicates that she,

too, has done her research. It took time and effort to find and collate the information that she

shared in this post, and her academic language here signals to readers that she is highly educated (an

online calculator puts this quote's Flesch-Kincaid readability score at 45.6 and a 13.2 grade level–

college level and "difficult to read"). This might backfire, of course, with an audience also influenced

by the anti-intellectualism of QAnon, and in fact Christy noted ruefully in our interview that this post did not get a lot of responses. But she nonetheless attempts identification on a shared value of independent investigation and frames her readers as smart people who care about kids and, when they know more about the movement, will want to keep their distance from things like ineffective interventions, "panic," and "dangerous ideology."[49] (Ivy made the religious stakes of information literacy even more explicit; in November 2020, she shared a screenshot of a tweet from @theostoria that read, "If the people of God are spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation, the world has no reason to believe us when we proclaim Jesus as Lord.")

4.7 Conclusion

In the interview quotations and posts addressed above–those featured as case studies and those noted to establish a wider pattern–an evangelical reader might hear particular resonances. They might hear familiar discourses of virtuous and godly behavior–Olivia's "as a Christian, I" statement all but echoes the "What would Jesus do?" slogan of the evangelical 1990s. They might recognize in Christy's warning about the danger of conspiracy the admonishment to "keep a tight rein on your tongue," which is a "restless evil" (from the book of James, NIV), to beware false prophets and teachers who "exploit you with fabricated stories" (2 Peter 2, NIV), and even to "let your yes be yes, and your no be no" (from Matthew 5, NIV). The concern Ivy raises–that when evangelical Christians spreading unfounded or dubious information that supports their worldview (or stretches

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[49] Direct responses to QAnon were perhaps surprisingly rare in my dataset; in addition to Christy's post, there are only two others: Gabe sharing an article that calls QAnon the "new religion coming to your church," which seems to function as a warning, and Ivy making a PSA that she doesn't want to engage anyone who ascribes to its "misinformation and fear-mongering." Gabe and one other poster, Beth, shared specific posts about sex trafficking that suggest commonly held assumptions about its prevalence and appearance are inaccurate. These writers and others repeatedly responded to misinformation and conspiracy theories they have seen circulating on social media, often in the form of ideas about COVID-19 (Gabe, Beth) and mail-in voting (Gabe, Beth, Christy), as well as "fact-checking" viral claims about Bernie Sanders' tax proposals (Beth), and the content of stimulus bills (Gabe). Beth, like Ivy, made general comments critiquing conspiracy theories: she shared a *Business Insider* article about the psychology of conspiracy thinking.

it rightward), they undermine their credibility–is straightforwardly a concern about the integrity of their witness to what the writers see as the truth of their faith.

It's perhaps not surprising that a generation of raised-evangelical social media writers who grew up on the Moral Majority rhetoric of voting with your dollar and your attention think carefully about their public statements, from what they wear in selfies to their use of swear words in Instagram captions, to the artists, writers, and speakers they endorse. All study participants spoke with me about their personal reflections, standards, and decisions about social media consumption– the interview protocol includes a probe about the religious media participants consumed, which I often didn't use because interviewees gave such robust answers to questions about "the landscape of your connections to evangelicals and evangelicalism on social media." At least eight of the 13 study participants also made posts like that made those reflections explicit, commenting publicly on the sources they read and shared, the authorities they trusted, the assumptions they made about social media platforms, and how those platforms are best used. Perhaps it was the skepticism and uncertainty, addressed above, about the possibility of exploiting the affordances of social media platforms to positive ends that produced these attempts to strike to the heart of the problem. More than one writer produced a post much like the post featured above, from Olivia, in which they broke down how to manipulate what Facebook shows you; many others posted how-tos about evaluating sources–like Christy, also below–or just expressed the importance of honesty and truth-telling. While rightwing elements were activating evangelical discourses to shore up the thin blue line, for example, and resist the tyranny of mask and vaccine mandates, the writers in this study pulled from similar evangelical rhetorical resources of personal piety and a strong emphasis on living out one's convictions about godly behavior.

As I recounted in Chapter 3, the writers in my study have positioned themselves against many features of contemporary white evangelicalism, including theology, culture, and politics. I was

surprised to find that their airing of those concerns is less often a direct critique of their community of origin–more on that in the next chapter–than a firm statement about how Christians should behave online. In this chapter I have reviewed traditions of witness that pollinate writers' thinking about how to do and model online political talk, argued that witness as a model addresses the tensions among participant beliefs about social media's formative power, and engaged case studies that indicate how they invoked information literacy in arguments they understood through the lens of witness. I reiterate the usefulness of witness as an interpretive frame for writers negotiating political talk on social media: as a flexible category focused on the rhetor's own experience and perspective, it accommodates uncertain and shifting audiences as well as uncertain returns (flexibility), it aligns with the networked persuasion afforded by writing on algorithmically-mediated platforms (accumulation), and it connotes a public representation of one's beliefs and values undertaken irrespective of cost, activating old evangelical notions of personal piety while also responding to the potent concerns about integrity that emerged in my Chapter 3 review of participants' definitions of "white evangelicalism."

For raised-evangelicals writing in unusual circumstances, and don't know who will read or respond, and in fact when their own social media network may be shifting away from the evangelical circles that marked their childhoods, the ancient tradition of witness might serve as touchstone and bridge. The preoccupation with integrity reviewed in this chapter shapes how participants think about their social media use, the content of their critiques, and the kinds of engagement they model. In fact, I suggest that for the writers in my study, all their writing on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram act as argument. They may or may not think of themselves as evangelicals now, but their thinking evokes the evangelical maxim that all aspects of their lives should point to God and witness to the truth. In the next chapter, I consider this identity performance more robustly, focusing on vulnerability and amplification as strategies through which raised evangelical writers trouble and

expand the category of persuasion–not only through their attempts to model healthy behaviors around social media activity, reviewed above, but through the many strategies they use to establish themselves as credible witnesses to the truth.

Chapter 5 Critique Reframed: Identity, Empathy, and Endorsement

5.1 Introduction

On election day 2016, Gabe posted the following on Facebook: "Might just start quoting this every third comment or so on every political post I participate in (as a reminder for those I engage with and myself): Ephesians 4:31-32 (NLT) 'Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.'" Four years later, the day after the 2020 election was publicly called for Joe Biden, he shared the memory with a rueful comment: "I should have followed through on this."

In this post, Gabe employs a passage from the New Testament as a standard for political talk that he applies to himself as well as his 2016 interlocutors, making implicit the argument that the behavior they have displayed is un-Christ-like. Then in 2020, he expresses regret that he, like them, has fallen short of that standard. The target of Gabe's critique is left open to interpretation–"those I engage with" aren't identified as evangelical, but his network of other pastors, congregants, childhood church friends, classmates from his Christian school, college buddies, and fellow Southwesterners mostly is. In mid-December 2019, however, Gabe had shared a link to another writer's essay about leaving evangelicalism that made his own position more explicit. He captioned the link with a quote from the essay: "I ultimately found an evangelical way out of evangelicalism, through the habit of relentless self-examination that we were encouraged to cultivate—albeit not quite in the way they intended." Taken together, these posts illuminate the deeply religious roots of Gabe's dissent from the religious and political orthodoxy of his childhood faith communities.

Evangelicalism, Gabe suggests, taught him positions and stances he no longer endorses and yet also gave him the tools–reflection, Biblical literacy, moral frameworks for political talk–which he used to reconsider them. The posts also provide insight into how Gabe and raised-evangelical rhetors like him frame their critiques of that orthodoxy. Having written about how participants describe white evangelicalism (Chapter 3), and how they think about their activity online (Chapter 4), I turn now to consider the strategies the writers in this study used to push back on what they viewed as pernicious features of white evangelicalism. I use Gabe's writing here to foreground several features of those critiques and the strategies they employ: Gabe advanced his message by sharing the work of another writer and endorsing their message to his own friends and followers. And Gabe not only made reference to the standards to which he holds himself and the habit of reflection that serves those standards, he also admitted publicly that he had failed.

In this chapter, I review the arguments my study participants levied in their "writing back." My first argument emerges from a problem that plagued my data analysis and writing: in answering the survey, all of the participants identified themselves as people who "wrote back" to their white evangelical communities of origin, but their posts about issues of conviction–politics, religion, and their intermingling–didn't look like I expected them to, and they also didn't follow easily identifiable patterns in form or content. Whether because of my own social location or because of the ways my research interest is taken up by the algorithm, in the years surrounding this study I regularly encountered posts expressing anger, lament, concern, and disgust at the latest actions of former Liberty University president Jerry Falwell, Jr., for example, evangelical support for Donald Trump, or the Southern Baptist Convention's handling of sexual abuse in the years following the 2016 election cycle. Those experiences suggested that strident critiques of white evangelicals and white evangelicalism were commonplace on social media. In interviews, participants reported emotions running high: anger, sadness, frustration, fear, a sense of betrayal and abandonment directed at white

evangelical institutions, friends, family members, and communities. Their social media posts reflected this, but they did so unevenly,[50] and not in the ways that my exposure to social media "discourse"–a term popularly and mimetically used to type antagonistic online debates, often performed for clicks–about evangelicalism had led me to expect.

The divergence of the posts from my expectations challenged me to reconsider the category of "writing back," shifting my emphasis from critique to the other strategies of engagement the study participants employed. The data ultimately led me to the conclusion that animates this chapter: the strategies these writers used to write back were inextricable from their identity construction online. I talk in this chapter about two meta-level themes that emerged from my many attempts to make sense of this incongruity, both of which depend on the construction of a credible persona. The first of these is *empathy*, or the practice of public self-reflection and self-disclosure around position changes, struggle, and difficult emotions, a phenomenon I turn to the work of Kenneth Burke and Lisa Blankenship to understand. The second is *endorsement*, an algorithm-aware but also algorithm-agnostic practice in which participants shared the rhetorical work of others in order to advance their questions, concerns, or critiques about white evangelicalism and the wider web of conservative religiosity, right wing politics, and conspiracy thinking.

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[50] It is possible that their social media activity, construed more broadly than this study allowed, might surface more pronounced patterns of direct critique–I could not, for example, capture activity that took place in closed groups, the comments they made on other people's posts, or ephemeral content like Instagram and Facebook stories, which disappear from view after 24 hours and therefore are not available for retrospective research. The limited available scholarship on 2020 social media activism–plus a proliferation of reporting and think pieces debating its sincerity and effectiveness (e.g., Latifi)–indicates that Instagram stories in particular served as vehicles for a substantial amount of political commentary (Dumitrica & Hockin-Boyers). However, the majority of writers in this study had indicated to me that Facebook was their primary platform for "writing back," suggesting that it was not Instagram stories but feed posts on that site that they most consciously directed to evangelical friends and family members; as millennials, social media connections from their communities of origin are logically more likely to exist on a platform that dominated the social media landscape while they were teens and emerging adults. Most of the posts directly cited in this chapter come from Facebook, perhaps for that reason, though some participants cross-posted, and I analyzed posts from all three platforms in the frame for this study.

These practices overlap, as the case studies in this chapter will demonstrate. My arguments

for them also advance the theory-building of Chapter 4 in several key ways. I established in that

chapter that the writers use the rhetorical resources of Christian witness, evangelical and otherwise,

as a flexible framework for negotiating shifting and uncertain audiences in algorithm-mediated

communication. They furthermore emphasize integrity both in their critiques of white

evangelicalism (see Chapter 3) and in the standards to which they hold themselves as they consider

the ethical demands to speak out on issues of conviction on algorithm-mediated platforms. Here, I

consider how that framework of witness and its attendant concerns with personal integrity manifest

in the identity construction in which these writers engage, and on which these two practices of

empathy and endorsement depend. Ultimately, I contend here that the writing reviewed in this

chapter troubles and widens the category of persuasion–just as the evangelical culture of public

witness demands that every part of one's life be submitted to the authority of Jesus Christ, this

raised-evangelical practice of witness leverages myriad aspects of life on the internet to construct a

credible persona, build trust, and argue for their convictions.

5.2 From Identity to Influence

Evangelicals have long been known as early adopters of new mediums; their zeal to spread

the gospel throughout the world made them eager users of technologies ranging from book

publishing to radio and television (Cooper; Vaca). Digital technologies have been no exception, their

widespread use further enhanced by the convenient synergies between the ideologies that supported

evangelicals' technological promiscuity and the promotional affordances of social networking sites.

In particular, I refer to the intensifying pressures for social media users to think of themselves as

public figures in a historically novel manner; to self-consciously construct a public persona that

presumes not only that "everything's an argument"–to quote the title of the celebrated writing

textbook–but that everything–online, at least–is a promotion. The language and logic of marketing shapes all our online experiences, and 2020 is a critical point in the professionalization of social media influencing. But even for those users not earning money for posts, the things we do, purchase, and post about operate as endorsements–and that self-conscious assumption expands the category of persuasion to cover a wide variety of online activity. In this section, I trace the ways the affordances of social media have shaped ideas and habits of identity construction[51] in order to make the case that, like their evangelical childhoods, social media trained the writers in this study to treat all their digital activity as persuasive, and because of that assumption, understanding critique requires a holistic examination of the things they do and say online.

Since their inception, social media platforms have presented novel opportunities to construct a self, and the innumerable available options provide something that feels like freedom of expression. In the landmark 2010 edited collection *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, danah boyd asserted that "[social media] profile generation is an explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment" (43). Digital studies scholarship in the years since that statement has considered both how users exploit the affordances of social networking sites in order to construct online identities and how those affordances have changed cultural conceptions of what identities are and how they are enacted (see, e.g., Greene et al. on dissociative identity disorder communities on TikTok and the spread of conceptions of self as a "system," including multiple alters, or personalities). boyd's foundational treatment foregrounded the social nature of the profiles users make on social networking sites, which "both represent the individual and serve as the locus of interaction… participants actively and consciously craft their profiles to be seen by others" (43).

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[51] Some of the scholarship on identity work online uses the terminology of performance, reminiscent of Erving Goffman's work on the presentation of self and theorists like Judith Butler. I have elected to use these terms with some flexibility, but focus on construction to parallel discussions of ethos "construction" and the colloquial resonance of "building" a brand.

This dual role–as a representation but also a locus or record of site activity–places substantial emphasis not only on aesthetic choices, but on how every part of your social media engagement might factor into the presentation of self available to others.

The eternal challenge of interaction, however, is that you can't control what other people say and do, nor how it makes you look. In the early versions of Facebook as well as the less dominant 2000s social networking sites on which these theories of social media were developed, other users had the ability to comment on one's profile; persistent features like tagging or @-ing, for example, perpetuate the ability of other users to affect the persona constructed on the site. I can untag myself from unflattering pictures or posts my Facebook friends have tagged me in, and I can delete their comments on my posts, but that's all after the fact. I also don't have absolute control over where a post travels or who sees it. Instagram is just screenshots of tweets now, as the joke goes (Alexander); "leaky" platforms allow posts and self-presentations built for one site and platform culture to travel to another, where they might encounter even more varied and unintended audiences. John R. Gallagher's work discusses the complications of web 2.0's massive rearrangement of the relationship between writers and readers; the ability of those readers to comment, react, and otherwise respond in such close proximity to the original text, makes writers more vulnerable. The option to edit, revise, and respond to commenters ad nauseam gives us more options, but also seems to make us more anxious.

In part because of the instability and iterability of online personas under construction under those conditions, social media users devote considerable energy to considering their self-presentation online. The paradigm and folk beliefs I outlined in Chapter 4 are one such example. The rise of professional social media personalities is another significant factor in the ways platforms and the digital culture they support shape the ways users think about their identity construction online. As platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have built out revenue-generating

strategies, they have increasingly become not only data mines for marketers but direct avenues for advertising. The rise of influencers is the most blatant example of monetized self-presentations online. In 2015, you might log onto Instagram and see a chronological photo stream of posts from your friends and celebrities you'd chosen to follow, many of whom were posting their own photos and tweets (Frier). In 2020, the year under consideration in this project, the internet was already beginning to make a substantial shift from the many-to-many messaging that defined the 2010s, wherein the content of social networking sites was produced by a critical mass of users, to a consumer and creator internet culture. Social media has slowly become "less social and more media," operating more like entertainment platforms than boyd's networked publics (Perelli & Bradley).[52]

In the time period examined in this study, persistent everyday users were already and increasingly adopting paradigms of public relations for navigating social media use and the possibility of virality, including language like self-branding (Marwick & boyd). Consumption patterns and activities–the clothes you wear in your photos, the design choices or brands featured in the home that is their setting, the events you attend–indicate what kind of aesthetic you're promoting, what audience you might be addressing, and what kind of person you are. Users implicitly understand that whatever you do or say or post about online operates as an endorsement of the venue you geotag, celebrity you mention, the mask you wear–or don't–to an event you post photos of online. You might get backlash or support from unexpected quarters. But for the platform and the tech company that owns it all attention is good attention; it boosts the associated companies,

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[52] Revenue-generating strategies are, of course, a primary driver, but one social explanation of the shift toward creator-consumer internet is that users are, in general, more self-conscious now than in social media's early days. Influencer strategists and tech reporters note that–perhaps as a result of the pandemic, in which professional at-home content reinforced heightened standards of curated lifestyles and unique skills, everyday users have grown reluctant to post their less than glamorous lives on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, ceding more ground to content creators (Perelli & Bradley).

places, activities, or ideas in the algorithm. By 2020, the year covered in this study, most apps had already incentivized all users to think in terms of engagement metrics; as of 2019, for example, Instagram made analytics available not just to professional accounts but to all users, so anyone could see which of their own posts–vacation photos, reshared memes, posts from a night out–garnered the most engagement (Frier). The unstable relationship of approval and attention has changed how we present ourselves in digital space and how we conceptualize our relationships to the people behind our likes, comments, and views. In a 2023 *New York Times* story, young people reported that acting "like an influencer" "comes naturally" (Maheshwari). It's just the way we behave online.

Participants viewed consistent messaging and consistent engagement–having a reliable brand–as important hallmarks of an "ideal" social media presence. It's evidenced by their confessions that they fall short of this standard, and their resistance to upholding it. Gabe told me in August 2022 that "I just share things that like I like, or that I think are interesting or that I think are important"– but he knows that undermines his position in the algorithm and his brand on Facebook. He could be doing more to build a platform and command greater attention. "Especially recently, I don't engage in comments and replies a whole lot. And I'm not focused. I don't have a niche or a topic that I spend all my time talking about. And that's really, the big thing is you have to have your thing and you've got to be the guy on the internet for that thing." Gabe also noted that his posts weren't getting a lot of engagement–an indication that he was attending to those metrics to assess the success of his rhetorical work online, and as an exigence to continue posting. Many of the writers expressed to me that they were careful not to become "the guy on the internet for that thing," which belies both their ambivalence about the internet–see Chapter 4–and the assumption that becoming an influencer was an option they had to actively resist. (Going viral, at least, was a live possibility, and one they couldn't control or anticipate.)

Gabe posted multiple times a day for most of the period in question, and Ivy did too. But these writers and others also managed their self-disclosures carefully, with the intention of both protecting themselves and making their contributions more credible. (For more about users' social media boundaries, see Chapter 4). The lure of self-promotion troubled Tyler, in particular, who was alarmed that posting had come to feel like a "reflex," before he quit Facebook and pulled back from other platforms. His desire for thoughtful, intentional social media use both led him to resist engagement and, in some ways, to uphold some of the logic of social media influencing as an industry: careful attention to what you say, how you say it, when, to whom, and to what end. Tyler, like many of the raised-evangelical social media writers, kept that consciousness about his activity even as he carefully built an alternative persona. He used his Twitter account to ask earnest questions to challenge conservatives or to get information from theologians and writers; he shared occasional humorous reflections or jokes; he posted so rarely–about anything, but especially religion and politics–that it might seem to his followers hard-earned when he did.

The writers instead pursued a self-conscious enactment of authenticity;[53] they positioned themselves as regular people with wide-ranging interests and investments. For some internet users, authenticity is best approximated by a demonstrated alignment between on- and off-line identity,

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[53] Haimson et al. notes, though, that many users experience something they call the "online authenticity paradox"–the pressure to share the negative while still maintaining a polished and positive online persona. Others in Haimson et al.'s study note that it's impossible to create a one-to-one correlation of offline life and online presentation, even if such a thing were desirable. It's equally impossible to evade the assumptions people might make about you because of their knowledge of your family background, because of your appearance, because of your hometown, your job, or any number of other associations. Olivia, after negative experiences at a former church, took moving out of state as an opportunity to institute new rules about permitting access to her personal facebook account. People made assumptions about her politics, in particular–because she's married to the pastor or because of her Southern accent, because of the conservative institutions with which she was affiliated as a young person, because she's white-passing. She speculated that people feel "betrayed" when they find out she's not what they expected–"it's like… now I feel like you're a wolf in sheep's clothing. So then all the loyalty goes out the window." She wonders what assumptions "is it just easier to leave people with," and is wary of adding folks who might "exploit information they have about me and my family," to the point of threatening her husband's job at the church. While she's generally open now about voting for Democrats, Olivia separates her public, professional writing–hosted on a business page in her name and relevant to her communications work with churches and ministries–and her personal account, which is limited to people she knows in real life.

sharing "the positive, negative, exciting, and mundane." Consistent messaging might help an ambitious writer build an audience, but for these raised-evangelical writers, their varied posting offered a different kind of credibility and opportunity. Scattershot social media activity like that which Gabe describes opens space for interaction with social media connections who might be loath to talk politics, but happy to react to memes and family photos. This habit echoes rhetorical theorizing about uses of self-disclosure in other online fora: of public online forums, Grabill & Pigg write that identity performances create "argumentative space" (101) that enable exchange. The field's focus on more agonistic forms of argumentation has led rhetorical scholars to overlook "important discourse moves" associated with identity and community-building, they contend, arguing ultimately that identity performance should be understood as enabling rhetorical agency. Invocations of the self create openings for exchange by building exigencies to which other discussants are compelled to respond, moving conversations from abstract to concrete, and bringing dynamism to stale interactions. In their study, disclosures or invocations of personal information were, in many cases, accompanied with explicit invitations for connection: "most often, participants simply ask questions to which they need answers and tell stories of their interactions with the topics at hand." They call this practice of "thinking together in ways that is deeply personal" "one of the most important affordances of online interactions" in internet fora (115).

The tl;dr,[54] to borrow an internet-ism: users are anxious and self-conscious about their identity construction online, and that concern makes many writers very intentional about their disclosures. I lay out this discussion of identity performance online to establish two things: first, all our online choices, from likes, shares, comments, and heartfelt posts to profile photos, handles, and geotagging are part of persona construction and therefore ethos; the construction of a self or

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[54] "Tl;dr" is shorthand for "too long; didn't read"–it often prefaces one-sentence summaries of long passages of text.

176

persona on social networking sites furthermore involves curatorial activity in which the user associates themself with other accounts, manages the feedback those accounts provide, and configures a network which locates them in social space. Second, opportunities to interact on common or neutral ground advance the trust on which writers trade when they engage controversial topics on social media. Third, folks are offering those common and neutral ground topics–vacation photos, photos of kids, information about local events and resources–with at least some of the conscious purpose they bring to more controversial posts. If, in fact, social media's affordances, cultures, and industries of self-representation activate evangelical ideas of witness, as discussed in Chapter 4, and in the 2020 manifestation of influencer culture in particular, study participants self-consciously considered all of their choices online as political ones, it follows that I should examine all those choices as context and grist for their political talk. The themes and case studies that follow trace the implications of this lens: it expands our view to include a wide swath of online activity that may not be traditionally counted as explicitly persuasive and therefore "rhetorical," and, in particular, squares with the networked persuasion afforded by writing on algorithmically-mediated platforms. For the writers in my study, all their writing online, and in fact all their identity performance on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, act as argument.

5.3 Theme 1: Empathy

To make sense of these oblique forms of critique and their relationship to identity construction, I turn to the work of Kenneth Burke on identification and Lisa Blankenship on rhetorical empathy. I am not so much bringing these two thinkers into conversation as foregrounding Burke's contribution to Blankenship's work; she cites Burke more than once as an inflection point for the field, contending that his theory of identification "destabiliz[es] the idea of power over others" as rhetoric's central goal (48). This premise, extended in the theories of

177

identification and rhetorical empathy, ground the idea that all online identity construction acts as argument. In each post, my participants are identifying themselves and also identifying with categories of others: parents, Star Wars fans, Chinese-Americans, Democrats or never-Trumpers, residents of a particular neighborhood, city, county, or state. While Blankenship foregrounds pathos as the classical element of empathy, I emphasize here that identification and rhetorical empathy is also a tool of ethos and more particularly of the identity construction raised-evangelical social media users do in their "writing back." My study participants used these strategies to cultivate goodwill and fellow-feeling over long periods of time, prioritizing trust-building over argumentation. I use Blankenship's theorizing in particular as an explanatory mechanism for the kind of "writing back" that predominated in my dataset of social media posts, but also as a frame for making rhetorical sense of the self-reflection and ambivalence marking much of the writing collected in that dataset and the comments participants made in their interviews with me. In this section, I review resonances of Burke and Blankenship's theory in my data before turning to a subsidiary pattern, arguing that the writers relied significantly on enactments of vulnerability to show themselves to be people of good faith–meaning both sound argumentation and Christian goodwill.

In *A Rhetoric of Motives,* Burke makes a statement so simple as to feel obvious: rhetoric–for identification–is only necessary because of the existence of division. If people were not separated in thought, feeling or experience, "there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (22). The exigence of division brings irony to the practice of asserting forms of unity, or "consubstantiality"; it also destabilizes sincerity as a necessary feature of ethos's good will, good sense, and good moral character. Anyone asserting shared values is doing so in at least subconscious recognition that they are not shared, or not entirely; in a manner of speaking, they are proclaiming a falsehood in order to make it more true. And in the case of raised-evangelical writers addressing their evangelical communities or origin, an honest belief that "we're in this together" cannot be a

178

prerequisite for rhetorical activity–a certain amount of performance is inherent in the project. While this is a challenge for all writers and particularly for those writers deeply invested in integrity, as those represented in this study have demonstrated themselves to be, they seem to negotiate the shared desires for persuasion and authenticity by choosing to believe well of their interlocutors if possible. This indication is visible in Chapter 3's definitions, in which the study participants discussed the role of ignorance in white evangelicals' errors, and in quotations later in this chapter about limiting their interaction with those "too far gone" to hold a healthy conversation. The reformist impulse latent in this persuasive project is less directed at white evangelicalism as a religious movement or institutional network than at the persistent hope that people who they have loved, trusted, and admired might yet be persuaded to think differently about their faith and its politics.

Blankenship might theorize this misalignment of feeling and strategy by turning our attention to her defense of empathy as rhetorical. She emphasizes that–in light of empathy's history of misuse to exploit those with less power and the dangers of demands that the oppressed consider the feelings of the oppressor, or hazard vulnerability that exposes them to risk–this project is particularly essential to those with privilege who "must learn to listen and acknowledge their power" (19). But rhetorical empathy has promise for rhetors navigating the many contextual shifts of power and privilege as a "different way of being-with-others," understanding "rhetoric-as-change" and rejecting the use of the master's tools, to borrow from Audre Lorde, to attempt to dismantle the master's house. And we don't have to feel generous in order to exhibit generosity; the idealized alignment of feeling and action is of little significance here. In defining rhetorical empathy as "both a topos and a trope, a choice and habit of mind," Blankenship follows the work of Julie Lindquist on strategic empathy, which is created through its conscious performance, or "staging"–"a fake-it-'till-you-make-it-approach" to developing the empathy you seek to present to others (Blankenship 9).

179

Per the Aristotelian adage, you are what you repeatedly do–and rhetorical empathy, Blankenship suggests, can help us to become people who "react in more ethical and rhetorically effective ways" to issues of injustice (11).

Blankenship offers four characteristics of rhetorical empathy, culled from a number of case studies but in particular her coding of "online discourse between gay-rights activists and social conservatives" (19). They read:

- Yielding to an Other by sharing and listening to personal stories

- Considering motives behind speech acts and actions

- Engaging in reflection and self-critique

- Addressing difference, power, and embodiment

Careful readers of this dissertation will recognize these features in many of the examples already introduced. From Tyler in Chapter 4, positing that the algorithm's effect on how his mom gets her news is shaping her behavior, to Christy's assertion that she understands friends posting misinformation about sex trafficking have a "desire to do good," to Gabe's self-critique at the beginning of this chapter–"I should have followed through on this"–these alternatives to agonistic rhetoric enable the writers to construct and enact a persona of thoughtfulness and goodwill. They are building trust by extending some level of trust, both in their posts and their interview commentary, making claims of identification that triangulate and aspirationally resolve differences of opinion about religion and politics.

Alternatives to argumentation have some prominence in studies of conservative rhetoric and responses to it. Shannon Crowley argues that fundamentalist forms of argument, which she conceptualizes as "ideologics," are marked by an insistence on uniformity of belief, defending those foundational beliefs against threats, and dismissing alternate claims by critiquing the character of

their advocates.[55] In that now canonical book, reviewed also in this dissertation's introduction, Crowley contends that the persuasion of fundamentalist audiences depends not on logic–as Blankenship also recounts–but on a shift in who or what that audience considers credible. For Blankenship, and for other scholars, traditions inside evangelicalism offer some potential avenues for this shift; and per Burke's discussion of identification, the use of these familiar rhetorical resources can activate and redefine shared values. As Bethany Mannon writes, "Evangelicals value personal stories told orally and in print as a way to share the Christian message, to grow in one's own faith, and to encourage other believers"; effective rhetors often "adopt part of a shared evangelical discourse," including discourses of testimony and witness, much discussed in Chapter 4 (144). Mannon describes the use of personal narrative as a move from a rhetoric that "values certainty" to a stance that values conversation and "defines spiritual growth as 'deeper exploration.'" (157-158). For Mannon and Blankenship, a more personal, vulnerable, and exploratory approach to rhetorical engagement is nothing less than a reconsideration of the criteria for righteousness.

In theological definitions of evangelicalism (see the introduction for discussion of the Bebbington quadrilateral and its limitations), *conversionism* is a hallmark belief: the believer should seek to bring others to faith in Christ. But the rhetorical empathy advocated by these scholars and practiced by the participants in this study, the goal is not bringing others to your views, but seeking first to change oneself–an echo, once again, of Gabe's reference to "an evangelical way out of evangelicalism," or at least its fundamentalist ideologics. In the comments reviewed in Chapter 4, the raised-evangelical social media writers in my study reflected frequently on their social media use and

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[55] Scholars have long debated the relationship and overlaps between evangelicalism and fundamentalism, as footnotes in other chapters have already discussed. Here I emphasize not the theological or historical valence of these terms, but Crowley's treatment of fundamentalist as an adjective for rhetoric, in particular her use of fundamentalism and Christian apocalypticism to identify an ideology that emphasizes "revelation, faith, and biblical interpretation" over empiricism to ground political claims (3).

spoke frankly about how their approach and behavior had shifted over time; several voiced, in particular, their regret at how they'd expressed their feelings on social media in the early years of the Trump presidency. At least one participant, Jordan, spoke explicitly about the obligation to speak out as a feature of their social media activity during the Trump years, during which they were a "typical keyboard warrior kind of Facebook person." Back then, Jordan said, "People were like, 'Silence is violence,' so it's like, 'Well, if I respond about this thing, I've also got to talk about this thing.'" (For more on "silence is violence," see Chapter 4.) Jordan found that adherence to this expectation quickly "turns your Facebook into this big litany of all this stuff to be pissed off about," a dynamic that contributed to their decision to take a break from Facebook in 2019. They had reached the limits of agonism, and themself.

In an unusual move, Jordan–who is non-binary–decided to reactivate their account in 2020 in hopes of generating productive dialogue around pressing cultural and political issues. They told me they think especially about "people I grew up with, the people that are still in my hometown," who might never have encountered a given way of thinking about gender identity or a trans and non-binary perspective: "Is this something that would make them think, "Oh, I don't agree with these people but I have empathy for what they're going through?" The goal of cultivating empathy in others led Jordan to reframe their own Facebook activity, which in 2020 and 2021 often included jokes, personal updates, and open-ended questions engendering discussion (from "What are you going to use your stimulus check for?" to "When you think of the phrase "my people," who comes to mind?"), as well as news stories with captions about attacks on transgender rights. Their work echoes Blankenship's definitions of rhetorical empathy, in particular "sharing and listening to personal stories" and "engagement in reflection and self-critique." In their interview, Jordan expressed a desire to "curb the instinct" to post out of anger or make a statement out of an obligation to comment on every controversy, that they felt was so overpowering in the years leading

up to their break. Instead, they asked, "can I contribute to this conversation in some way that could actually make a difference?"

5.3.1 Vulnerability

For many of the study participants, one answer to Jordan's question is this: *I can offer something of myself.* While Blankenship doesn't use the term "vulnerability" in her four characteristics, it appears elsewhere–and fittingly so, for the term and for this project–in the first-person narrative that opens her text. She doesn't define the term either, but relies on narrative examples of self-disclosure and openness to engagement to characterize it. Her thinking about rhetorical empathy, she writes, emerged from her own biography as someone raised in "a conservative, Bible-belt culture" who, after coming out as a lesbian, faced strife and rejection from family and friends "who believed being gay and Christian are incompatible, and who couldn't deal with the cognitive dissonance I presented" (13). When logical arguments with loved ones went "nowhere," she needed other strategies for navigating that gulf of difference and her own pain and anger. Vulnerability, she found, changed both her and her loved ones–"a profound lesson for someone raised in an evangelical Christian culture that values, above all, converting others, and that believes changing one's mind and being open to others are forms of compromise rather than ways of learning and becoming better" (14). Justin Lee, a Christian gay rights activist profiled in Blankenship's monograph, echoes this experience and emphasizes that vulnerability and self-disclosure is for him a tool of meeting people where they are, with the beliefs and information they currently have. Personal experience and dialogue will make the difference in moving conservative Christians toward tolerance, he says, more so than logical argument–but it takes time and investment, a "long view of rhetorical engagement" that Blankenship calls another "important aspect" of rhetorical empathy. It's a "process based on reflection and exchange" that acknowledges the audience is a conversation

partner, not a monolith, nor a stereotype (99). Any given interaction is but one moment in the ongoing conversation.

So the trust-building described by Blankenship's theorizing and practiced by participants has behind it sound scholarship. To invite empathy, rhetors extend it, and show themselves in need of it: writers in my study put forward narratives of their own pain, challenge, or growth around the issues of conviction under debate. More often than not, they disrupted fundamentalist consensus not by making their own points, but by sharing the work of others. In some cases, the writers positioned themselves as learners and recipients of knowledge, advancing the perspective of a given thinker by sharing narratives of their own experiences and encounters with that person's work. In Blankenship's theorizing, these initial forays are an attempt to interrupt cycles of distrust and instead foment humanizing rhetorical engagement, extending the consideration the rhetor hopes to receive– treating others, one might say, as you would like to be treated. The features of this chapter's opening anecdote from Gabe, in which he wryly confesses falling short of his scriptural standard for political talk, surface here once again: the practitioner of rhetorical empathy considers the self and the other, considers multiple possible perspectives and motives, and may choose to enact a sentiment they do not feel, negotiating both the potency of their critique and the humanity of their audience.

The profiled writers in this chapter practice rhetorical empathy in a variety of ways–Kelly's long-form discussion of books, and occasional long first-person reflections, are unlike Beth's collection of photos and posts about her geographic region (see later sections of this chapter), which are further unlike Christy's expressed assumption of goodwill on the part of those friends who had shared misinformation about human trafficking (see Chapter 4). Some lean more on self-disclosure, some on giving others the benefit of the doubt, some on acknowledgement that we all fall short sometimes and fail to exhibit the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.[56] The ambivalence they display in interviews about their 2020 social media writing is in fact a further indication of rhetorical empathy's fit as a frame–it comes from the robust self-examination accompanying each post. *What am I trying to get out of this? Why do I feel compelled to say something? Who am I talking to? What am I willing to do to connect with that person? What do I owe to them? What do I owe my convictions?* Rhetorical empathy operates as a strategy that writers use to negotiate a sustainable ethos–a persona of goodwill, good sense, and good moral character that reflects both what they believe about the topic at hand and the standards they have for how they treat others. These are not concerns held in two different hands–a value of caring for others plays both in how they engage an audience and how they address the needs of people affected by the topic at hand.

5.4 Profiles

I turn now to the first series of profiles, interspersed through this chapter, that evidence and advance its arguments. I do so for several reasons: first, because the persuasive efforts captured under the rubric of "writing back" muster such individualized rhetorical resources; second, because the key strategies reviewed in this chapter overlap in unique ways in each case. In these sub-sections, to the extent allowable by my commitments to participant privacy, I review how the writers use their own biographies and emotions to cultivate rhetorical empathy that marks both their social media writing and the new religious identities they construct through that work. I also, in each case, address the sources that they leverage and how they personalize or extend the work of others to advance their message.

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[56] See Galatians 5:22-23, NRSV.

5.5 Beth: I Am Your Neighbor

From her Facebook and Instagram feeds–Beth cross-posted frequently–it was clear that Beth was active in her family and community. Posts about her own life–her workouts and her favorite 90's band, a costume event at work, photos of family outings or her daughter's artwork–were peppered with local information, from voting dates and locations to a COVID-19 testing site to the sign-up for the fall Bible study series at her church. She got quite a few responses, too, even on low-stakes posts: when she asked if anyone wanted a box of a hygiene product that didn't work for her, she got 18 comments on the post from folks throwing their name in before ultimately recommending she donate to the local high school or women's shelter. There are 22 comments on a post asking for recommendations for a new dog groomer after hers shut down. During the year, she geotagged and recommended local businesses, shared memes, funny videos, and millennial nostalgia content, posted about fun activities for kids in her area, and shared prayers and reflections on parenting a feisty daughter. She also spent a lot of time thanking people: the daycare staff who provided educational materials for parents during lockdown; the grocery store clerk who helped load her car; first responders and medical personnel; truck drivers helping restock store shelves; her workout buddy; the library after they'd hosted a children's event. And she posted a lot about the 2020 election cycle and the issues dominating our national politics.

Like Kelly, below, Beth shared a lot of material from "insider" sources, like a statement from flagship evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*'s editorial board calling for Trump's removal after his first 2019 impeachment and "advice from a local pastor" about not demonizing the political other. In a deep red Southern state, which Beth described more as "non-voting" than Republican, much of her 2020 content about politics served to disrupt the idea that all Christians think the same way–and specifically, the idea that all Christians in your community think the same way. That message is in many ways predicated on Beth's ability to identify herself with her audience, a project for which she

uses all the posts summarized above: she reminds her Facebook friends regularly that she is a member of their community by posting about her life in that community and enacting some of the hallmarks of online authenticity surfaced in Haimson et al.'s research on that phenomenon: their respondents spoke about truthfulness, honesty, consistency, vulnerability, and genuine interactions with others, all practices Beth cultivated in her online activity.

Beth was also not afraid to call attention to her performance of these traits, or others' lack of them. She begins a summer 2020 post about political discourse by saying, "I'll be really honest"– seeing how Christians she looked up to have been speaking about people who vote differently has broken her heart. This statement opens an almost 300-word post accompanied by a breakdown of the votes in her metro area, county, and state, that indicates that more than 1 in 4 who voted in the county cast their ballots for Democrats in what was, at the time of her writing, the most recent election (probably the 2018 midterms). That's a minority, of course, but Beth argues that it's not an insignificant one; when her friends make sweeping statements about voters on the other side, you're hurting "people you know." You may even, she says, be pushing them away from the church and from Christ. She reiterates the cost of these comments on folks' real relationships, moving from people in general back to the impact these comments are having on her personally: hearing her mentors, former teachers, community leaders, and neighbors attack people who may, like her, vote for Democrats is "is hurtful. It's hurting me." "Let's be honest," she says again, in her concluding paragraph–God didn't design the two-party system, and God rules over all things. God also cares more about who we are than how we vote.[57]

This post got more than 100 likes, 50+ comments, and a half-dozen shares. One of the later comments is from Beth herself, who replies to the thread to express how sorry she was to hear that

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[57] Please refer to the methods chapter for discussion of how I faithfully paraphrase participant posts in order to preserve their privacy while also communicating the specifics of their rhetorical choices.

so many people had had similar experiences, and to say that she'd received a number of messages from people who had left their churches over "hate" surrounding politics. Many people who commented included references to Bible verses, including from 1 Peter (which includes instructions to "be subject to every human authority" for the sake of the Lord), Colossians 4:6 ("let your speech always be gracious"), and Matthew 24-25 (in which Jesus tells parables about servants who are shown to be faithless when their master returns) (all quotations NRSV).

In this post, Beth leans once again on her identity as a literal and figurative neighbor to her Facebook friends. The stats are from her metro area, her county, her state; the suffering is hers, the respected friends and leaders who have caused harm have done it to her. She emphasizes in her initial message and her many replies to comments that there is no us v. them—the "them" is part of "us," whether that "us" is the network of Beth's friends, her town, and the church. She is careful, in this post, to say that this injunction should apply to everyone; while she calls out those who are demonizing Democrats, she indicates that no one, and certainly not anyone who calls themself a Christian, should be speaking of others with such condemnation. That both-sides language might trouble readers who find it to be a false equivalence, but it operates here to undergird her honesty and vulnerability—hallmarks not only of Haimson's aspirational formulation of online authenticity, of also of Blankenship's rhetorical empathy—with an assertion of integrity: she is invoking a standard that she applies to herself. In fact, in this piece, she doesn't call herself a Democrat. That was an intentional choice, she said in her interview, because identifying herself in that way "would've almost ruined my message because I think that would've been the cause of debate." Instead of a discussion about who to vote for, she wanted a discussion about how to treat people—and "if you are a kind person, if you identify with Christ, act like it."

At the time of our conversation about this post, almost two years had passed—but Beth remembered her experience of Facebook around this time as "feeling inundated" with negative

generalizations about liberals and Democratic voters from the moment she opened the site. She felt "hurt and outraged" and wanted to "channel that into something good" by "personaliz[ing] it" for folks who might not have a face to the group they're insulting. "I think that those people like to think it's everyone," that everyone in their community believes the same things, despite the stats Beth tracked down to demonstrate diversity of opinion in her town. But "I know the hearts of those people who were making the generalizations"—"they wouldn't call me those things, but they would call a group I seem to identify with those things." She said she doesn't believe she'll change minds by doing this, but maybe folks will think twice about what they say because it applies to someone they know and love; maybe they'll double check the sources they share. She resisted the urge to post directly oppositional statements like "'Man, everyone seems to be talking about this thing and I think they're getting it wrong,' which… makes me sound like I'm this jerk that thinks I'm always right." But "sometimes it's an act of good trouble, I feel like, to raise–'maybe.' I want you to just think about the 'maybe.'" Her consistent message is that she's okay with how you vote, as long as you're truthful, thoughtful, kind, and well-informed–language she uses and demonstrates when sharing quizzes about how you align with candidates on the issues, fact-checks about voting by mail, how to look up your sample ballot, and op-eds asking folks to consider the multiple reproductive healthcare policies that might be consistent with a pro-life ethic.

5.6 Theme 2: Endorsement

In Chapter 4, I argued that my participants view the algorithm as a persuasive force and one they hope to bend to their own purposes, seeding its powers of amplification with the values they want to spread by posting original content but also by liking, sharing, and commenting on content they want others to see. But participants' lack of engagement with wider hashtag movements, and even their limited engagement with projects like the #BlackOutTuesday initiative, further

underscores the value they placed on the "personal element of rhetoric" (Blankenship 86). While hashtags might, by collecting large numbers of posts and standardizing them in a manner visible to an algorithm–think Twitter's "trending topics"–bring a particular movement to wider attention or to the attention of decision-makers in media, culture, and government, they depend more on numbers than on the rhetorical work of any one individual. The writers whose work is captured in this study focused on audiences to whom they had a personal connection (see Chapter 3), and for whom their particular and familiar voice might therefore carry weight. (In Tim's words, "I'm not particularly interested in arguing with evangelicals that I don't know.") This is the context that gives rise to empathy and vulnerability as central themes in critique.

Nonetheless, the writers in this study still regularly exploited the affordances of social media platforms to share and retweet the work of others, particularly when that work might be considered provocative to the white evangelical audiences on which this dissertation is focused. As John Gallagher argues in update culture, social networking has rearranged the relationship between writers and audiences, who have the ability to comment in close temporal and spatial proximity to the original text; it has furthermore rearranged the relationship between social media users and their source material, the posts, links, and images of others that they share. When a writer shares material, especially when that material is native to the platform they are using–e.g., another user's Facebook post shared on one's own Facebook account–they bring that source to their audience in a context that provides unprecedented access to the source. It's easy enough to click through and find a great deal more about who and what lies behind a given post; it's also a confusing media environment in which sources of authority are undergoing significant renegotiation and parsing a great deal of information becomes challenging for any individual user (see, e.g., Campbell on religious authority). In such an environment, the endorsement of a trusted friend or social media connection, someone you know, takes on greater resonance. So writers in the study shared material to bring a non-

normative perspective into the circle of trust their identification has built; they also extended the range of their credibility by intimately invoking sources who have the authority to speak on subjects outside of the original writers' own experience and expertise. This is particularly apt for white participants on issues related to race, a theme I develop later in this section.

I chose not to organize this set of strategies, around the specific actions taken in the posts where I identified it (e.g., sharing a news article, image-text, post, or screenshot, with or without a caption) but around the relationship the writer draws between themself and the material they are sharing. In fact, the particular actions I capture in this section exhibit both overlaps and some tension; sharing the work of others can operate as a personal recommendation or as a way of floating an idea while maintaining a certain distance. Yet as the themes of empathy and, even more precisely, vulnerability place emphasis on how the writer exposes and leverages their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings, the theme of endorsement contends with how the writers make use of the work of others. The case studies later in this chapter illuminate the complexity of the calculations writers made around how to most effectively and authentically share the work of others; here I call out two ways in which writers engage and amplify the ideas of others. The first of these moves is to *personalize*. The second is to *extend*.

5.6.1 Sharing the Ideas of Others: Two Intersecting Strategies

5.6.1.1 Personalize: Making It Real, Bringing It Close

The interminglings of the rhetorical strategies reviewed in this chapter are most pronounced in this move. It is most visible when the writer explicitly calls attention to their own experiences in a caption to a shared post, for example. Beth used the word "personalize" in her interview; we might argue that Beth's post sharing the voting statistics for her county and saying that "these are real people you are calling names, and in fact you are hurting me"–a paraphrase–is an act of

personalizing abstract information that she culled from another location for readers who will now associate that data with Beth, their friend and neighbor. She screenshotted that information herself, of course; others might share from a meme page, from a public post, an article, an infographic, etc., and in the caption denote the ways the material captured there affects them. Ivy, for example, shared a post from a Black woman describing the impacts of systemic racism on her own life in an open letter to Black conservative Candace Owens. Ivy noted that she knew the writer and commented positively on her character, communicating to Ivy's own white evangelical followers that there were only a few degrees of separation between them and this Black woman, who recounted having the cops called on her in the parking lot of a white church.

It may also be done at some temporal remove, a personalization that requires the reader to have attended to the life and social media activity of the poster. Anya, for example, shared the Ravi Zacharias' International Ministries public update on the allegations of sexual abuse made against its eponymous founder with no caption. A few weeks later, she shared an open letter from her own blog, and captioned it saying that she had previously posted about the positive influence of Ravi Zacharias on her faith–but now she wanted to call attention to the allegations and urge the organization to investigate fully. (Posthumous investigations, including those of *Christianity Today* journalists whose work Anya shared, showed conclusively that Zacharias had sexually harassed and assaulted a number of women during his public ministry.) Readers who knew Anya, who had been her Facebook friend for a long time, would know from her history of public writing about Zacharias that the revelations of sexual abuse she shared were deeply concerning to her. In all cases, the personalizing move connects an idea or perspective to oneself, endorsing that post as not only legitimate, but also relevant to the writer's white evangelical readers. If Ivy, or Anya, or Beth is a person of goodwill, and this post is meaningful or personal to them, shouldn't it matter to you, too?

For some writers, this move operates to associate the speaker very intimately with the perspective under discussion. For some of the multiracial members of the study population, this was particularly true. Olivia, who is Chinese-American on her mother's side and describes herself as white-passing, and Ivy, the red-haired child of a Latina mother, both reported thinking carefully about when and how to negotiate those aspects of their online personas, and when it's their right or responsibility to name their heritage in captions, comments, and shared material on social media. While she feels some "imposter syndrome" about her Latina identity, Ivy told me that she sometimes discloses or invokes in order to disrupt prejudicial comments and stereotypes, both online and in person—"I like being able to pull out the card of just saying, yeah, well, I'm half-Mexican, and my family" is not like you're assuming. She does it to personalize the issue at hand, be it immigration or government benefits—

> because when someone says something insensitive like that, they're usually behind a wall. But if it's in person, or they're saying it in an echo chamber, I like being able to say that to them and challenge that, because I want you to look me in the eye and tell me, I'm worthless. Don't talk about somebody else who you don't know that they're worthless. Look me in the eye and tell me yourself. Let's see if you have the courage to actually do it. Because it's—it's a devaluation of human life. And people can have a lot of courage when they're saying it online. And people can have a lot of courage when they're talking in an echo chamber. It's when that point gets challenged, and they have to face somebody who they disagree with, you kind of see how they truly feel about it.

Olivia posted directly about teaching her daughter Cantonese, cooking Asian foods, and celebrating Chinese holidays, as well as sharing posts celebrating Asian American Christian writers and a "Statement On Anti-Asian Racism in the time of COVID-19" from the Asian American Christian Collective. Identifying herself as Asian-American "falls into the political sector for me," because it so

often comes into play in political conversations, she said. But she wanted people in her mostly white, conservative community to know that she's Asian to sidestep the frequent experience of having to decide, in the moment of encountering a racist joke or comment, whether to identify herself: "And so I think making these posts talking about it a lot is almost like a defense mechanism, because then I'm not put in settings that are uncomfortable, or at least not as often." It also feels to her like an act that promotes safety for the other Asian members of her community, from neighbors to family members. Olivia's mom, who is not white-passing, lives nearby. "And so it isn't just about people knowing that I'm Asian. It's about protecting her, too." In many ways, this effort to normalize mirrors Beth's arguments about political identity and voting habits in the case study above: it challenges the boundaries of white evangelical communities by asserting that the us/them distinction is not as clean as some rhetoric would have it. "They" are your neighbors–your siblings in Christ– too.

5.6.1.2 Extend: Using Transitive Properties of Trust to Advance an Idea

I set up *extend* here not as a counterpart to personalize as a category of rhetorical work, but a complement and intersection. The direct object of *extend* is intentionally ambiguous–the writer might use this strategy to extend the trust they have built to cover a perspective outside the evangelical in-group; they might seek to extend the thinking of the community to consider a new question; they might seek to extend their own credibility by incorporating a voice with greater authority on the subject under discussion, either because of their expertise or their standing with the target audience. In any case, they are reaching further in order to connect their readers with this idea or information. This strategy offers greater remove than the posts discussed in Theme 1, or under *personalize*, in part because of the affordances of social media sites. Since around 2017, Twitter has provided significant source material to Instagram and to Facebook to a lesser extent. Popular tweets are screenshotted and shared predominantly by meme accounts, which might, for example, collect screenshots of

tweets on a particular theme to fill out Instagram's carousel of up to ten images (Alexander). In 2018, Megan Farokhmanesh–writing in *The Verge*–noted that this trend predominates among people then 30 and under–so, born 1988, two years into the birth year subset examined in this study–and quoted an Instagram creator, Gabriella of @sighswoon, who noted that users have a different relationship to a screenshotted tweet or other image-text: "People are way more willing to communicate with an idea present in a meme than they are with an idea from a specific person/face." The "idea gets to float around with no bias."

The text-heavy image has also trended heavily on Instagram in the early 2020s (Lorenz), a reflection of the long-held social media marketing adage that posts that include an image are rewarded by the algorithm. These dynamics–the use of screenshotted tweets to spread ideas on Instagram and Facebook, and the sense that a user sharing a tweet created by someone else has greater distance from the ideas in it which can then be examined independently–as well as more quotidian cross-posting (posting the same image and text to Instagram and Facebook, for example) and multimedia communication appear in the cases examined in this study. Writers in my study used tweets and image-texts sourced from other platforms to raise a position or idea using the looser framework of reblogging–"I encountered this and found it interesting"–rather than a more explicit endorsement. During the 2020 primary season, for example, Beth shared a *Washington Post* quiz that showed takers how various Democratic candidates aligned with their issue positions: "Even if you are a Republican, this resource helps spell out who aligns with you on which issue. It was very insightful for me!" She makes clear her assumption that folks vote based on their issue positions, and that they will find alignment with these candidates regardless of their party identification, but she offers no testimonial or endorsement for a particular candidate. (A month later, she shared another such quiz from ISideWith.Com that included candidates from both parties, captioned with a reminder to "do the work before you head to the polls!") Some writers explicitly described posts like

this as an effort to intervene in the media environment or diet of their friends and followers (see also Christy in Chapter 4). Gabe's sharing patterns were an effort to address COVID-19 misinformation–he might repost news articles or case numbers without commentary, for example, or–if he saw a Twitter thread screenshotted on Facebook with an unhelpful framing caption–go directly to the source to take a screenshot which he then shared on Facebook. He wanted folks seeing misinformation to also encounter his post as a counterpoint. Sharing about commentary, though, was a way to underscore the legitimacy of the information or perspective he was advancing: "I'm not an epidemiologist," he said, so "I didn't want it to be about me. I wanted it to be about the data, about the experts."

Gabe also once in this year shared a post that included a video interview and a long quotation from celebrated conservative pastor and author John MacArthur. The quotation argued that it was not Biblical for churches to hold in-person worship services in defiance of public health restrictions. Gabe described being sincerely surprised that John MacArthur would take that position, and decided to share the post: "I was like, 'Okay, so this is a person who's well respected with the more conservative parts of my followers or of my friends, and he's saying something that I really, really think is important right now… Maybe this will help influence the people who wouldn't listen to other voices necessarily.'" The challenge came in the comments–one from a pastor friend who expressed his approval of John MacArthur, and another from someone who noted that in the wider interview MacArthur advanced misinformation about the virus, even though she agreed that churches should remain closed during lockdown. Gabe chose not to respond, fearing it would undermine his goal–"If people read this and then went into the comments and saw me and somebody else being like, "Well, but actually he's terrible"–that would kind of distract from what I wanted this to be about." Here the amount of information accessible to his readers when he shared the post became a liability–he wanted to endorse one feature of MacArthur's comments to an

196

audience who might trust MacArthur more than they trusted Gabe's other sources, but a reader

from a different position called him out on amplifying MacArthur's other, more objectionable views.

In this case, Gabe extends himself, in a way, to identify a palatable source that backs a view

unpopular with his target audience; he uses MacArthur's words in order to connect with readers

further from his own position. Likewise, Beth uses the words of others to reach a far distance. She

sets out a resource that does not commit her or anyone else to a particular perspective but extends

an invitation to consider voting decisions on less partisan terms. Extending, then, means a stretch in

one or more directions, from one or more banks of pre-existing trust–Gabe borrows some reader's

pre-existing trust in MacArthur to make his own advocacy of church closures credible; Beth extends

her own credibility as a consistent advocate of informed voting to float the legitimacy of Democratic

candidates and their supporters, and the possibility of the reader's own support. While identification

was above covered under "Theme 1: Empathy," I call it out at this moment to emphasize the

intermingling of these strategies, which will become even more visible in the section that follows.

5.6.2 Sharing the Perspectives of People of Color

I identified a wide range of posts in the dataset that share the work of others to advocate for

evangelical readers to attend to "diverse perspectives." In this subsection, I turn to a narrower

pattern across the sharing the study's raised-evangelical writers did: the sharing, in particular, of the

writing and perspectives of people of color. Most often posts collected under this grouping follow

the pattern demonstrated by Kelly, above: the writer invokes the excellence or expertise of a person

of color in a post about political, cultural, or religious concerns. This may be directed explicitly to

white evangelical audiences–e.g., Olivia's Facebook post sharing a list of Asian Christian women

writers and theologians "you should be following" in honor of Women's History Month–or it may

be a more generalized celebration for white evangelical followers to "overhear"–for example,

Jordan, who has Guyanese heritage, made a series of posts celebrating notable Guyanese people including actors, scholars, and entrepreneurs in early 2020. Some of the posts, particularly those by white participants, explicitly invoke writers of color in terms of their expertise on racial politics, as Tim does when he shares, in June 2020, a video from Black pastor talking about the problem with "reconciliation" as a framework for relationships between white and Black communities or individuals. In each case, the implicit argument asks white evangelical readers to accept the writer's endorsement and therefore to consider the perspective of a non-white person on faith, politics, or both.

For Jordan and Olivia, who share identities with the people they are highlighting, the post operates more as affirmation. For Tim, sharing posts from Black pastors and anti-racism leader Ibram X. Kendi, and Ivy's repost of her former colleague's open letter to Candace Owens, as well as Kelly whose endorsement of a Black friend's book is discussed below, the practice of algorithmically amplifying marginalized voices overlaps significantly with discourses of anti-racist allyship that achieved prominence online during the summer of 2020 in particular (see, e.g., Roden et al.). While not all these posts come from that time period–Kelly posted about her friend's book in March, some time before the murder of George Floyd and subsequent nationwide protests, all the posts in the data set take place in the wider context of the Black Lives Matter movement, which has had a national profile since the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri, after a Ferguson police officer shot and killed Black teenager Michael Brown. That movement is inextricable from its hashtag and can be credited with introducing digital activism to the popular consciousness of many Americans. Meredith D. Clark's work, for example, makes an explicit linkage between allyship in online spaces and strategies like retweeting or sharing–while the manifestations of an ethic of white allyship for racial justice shift across contexts, she writes, online, "it may mean seeking and circulating narratives from a diverse cross-section of marginalized users, and actively crediting their insights as starting

points for would-be white allies to take informed action" (530). Clark's study participants, while more explicitly activist and engaged with the discourse of anti-racism than my own, use very similar language to describe their retweeting and sharing and the rationale behind it: "To me, amplifying just means seeing something . . . something that I wouldn't say because I'm not a Black person, and saying 'hey, I'm going to make sure my audience sees this because they wouldn't necessarily see something like this'" (Participant "Alex," qtd. in Clark 529). The implied question, "what is mine to say, given my positionality?" echoes in particular comments from Anya, addressed in Chapter 4's subsection on integrity as a tenet of raised-evangelical witness on social media.

In cases where a raised-evangelical writer shares the work of a Christian of color, their writing invokes not only these patterns, but also challenges the equivalence of whiteness and Christianity that Anthea Butler contends is a fundamental ideology of white evangelicalism. By challenging readers to consider the Christian bona fides of the rhetor whose work or perspective the study participant is sharing, the post challenges white evangelical normative identities and gestures toward an alternative religious public that may be more racially diverse, more ecumenical, more global, more liberal, or some combination of the above. Anya did this explicitly; in August 2020 she shared screenshots of a tweet thread from @dpcassidyC3, a now-defunct account, that contended that the average Christian today is young, female, non-white, living in the Global South, and "has not been to your conference" or read *Christianity Today*. It concludes that white American nationalist Christians have much to learn from vibrant Christian communities outside the United States, especially about "the presence of God's power in the absence of political power." Digital networks particularly participate in this project of reframing religious identity, a theme I return to in the conclusion of this dissertation.

By "treat[ing] personal experience as a source of authority," the writers not only invoke a tradition of testimony that shores up their own credibility but also imply that non-white and non-

evangelical voices are in fact essential to a believer's search for truth and pursuit of righteousness (Mannon 155). I turn now to the chapter's second case from Kelly as one significant example of a writer personalizing racism in the church and both borrowing and extending credibility to bring a Black perspective on evangelicalism to her own largely white social networks. I argue here that Kelly frames an engagement with this writer and her ideas as part of a pursuit of holiness.

5.7 Kelly: Amplifying Alternative Perspectives

During "long 2020," Kelly, a white woman married to a pastor in a major East Coast city, posted frequently about books–those she was reading to and with her children, and those she read on her own. These books ranged in genre, from picture books and young adult fiction to Christian memoir and Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns.* Her comments also range in length; some books get a dedicated post, while others are shown in a stack without direct reference in the caption. In late March of 2020, Kelly posted twice about the same book, written by a Black woman and published by a Christian press. Once, she shared promotional material for the release of a book that "right now I'm in the middle of," about which she planned to "share more later." Two weeks later, she wrote about it at greater length, including a photo of the cover she jokes is smudged by her son, a "big fan" of this book.[58]

In her caption to the photo, Kelly reports that she had just finished "my friend [author first name]'s book" before sharing that her writing "shaped my understanding of racism in a big way over the last few years," and expressing gratitude for the "openness and bravery." She reinforces her personal connection to the author by describing their upbringings as "similar," before saying that the author has written this book to her children "with the invitation for the church to look over her

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[58] In order to better preserve Kelly's privacy, I have chosen not to name the book here, and I again paraphrase heavily in sharing her words.

shoulder." Kelly summarizes two key points the author makes about how Christians silence or sidestep the problem of racism before noting that the book includes mention of "ideas, historical figures I sadly had not heard of, things to research, and ways to serve my black brothers and sisters better." Furthermore, she writes that the author "opens up the unique struggles" faced by Black mothers, and "if that is not your personal reality, you will be challenged" toward empathy and awareness, closing with gratitude for the author's generosity in sharing her story.

In this post, Kelly builds on her pre-existing habit of sharing what she reads–because of that established pattern, it would not strike any of her followers as unusual that she post about a book from a Christian press, nor that she comment on the content or connect it to her own life and experience. (A few months earlier, for example, she wrote similarly about wanting to reread to learn more from a book written by a Christian therapist that she also expressed eagerness to "share with you," her friends and followers.) In this caption, and photo, cross-posted on both Facebook and Instagram, Kelly introduces the author as a trusted and generous friend with whom she shares significant childhood experiences, establishing the author's insider status in evangelical circles, and leans into the book's framing as a book written by mother for her children. The book may address racism in the church, yes, but Kelly here invokes a genre of conversation about motherhood wherein newer parents can learn from the experiences of others. She reports gaining knowledge from the book–"ideas, historical figures I sadly had not heard of"–while continuing to emphasize her status as a learner–"things to research." And in closing, she promotes the possibility of personal growth through the book while sidestepping what may be an expected framing: she uses "if that is not your personal reality," rather than "if you, like me, are white" and then employs the passive voice. "You will be challenged," she writes, without identifying her author friend or the book itself as the challenger.

Kelly relies on vulnerability and empathy in her deeply personalized description of her friend's book about racism. Drawing on the "antecedent genre" of witness, and testimony (Mannon), she tells a story of personal transformation from naïveté to understanding or from ignorance to empathy and awareness. By beginning with her own shortcomings, Kelly not only communicates vulnerability but also draws a path to new understanding that her readers can walk without judgment. By framing the pursuit of understanding and "ways to serve my black brothers and sisters better" as appropriate next steps for evangelical Christians, she invokes familiar frameworks of personal growth and care for other members of the "church family" or "family of God"–when she writes "black brothers and sisters," evangelical readers will hear, like the "understood subject" of a sentence, the appended phrase "in Christ." Kelly's rhetorical strategy compounds the framing the author used in the book under discussion, which positions evangelical readers as a "secondary audience" overhearing an intimate conversation between parent and child and offers critiques of churches and Christians from an insider position. Not only does the author share Kelly's conservative evangelical upbringing, per Kelly's description, but she publishes this book with an evangelical press. Anyone who searches the title after seeing Kelly's post will recognize language in the descriptive and promotional copy like "an identity firmly rooted in Jesus Christ," and "discipleship" as cues that this is not only a book for Christian readers, but evangelical ones. If Kelly is successful in establishing her own ethos, and vouching for her friend's, conservative white evangelical readers may come around to accepting the credibility of a Black evangelical woman and adopting as authoritative her views on racism in the church. What could be more evangelical than studying a text and applying it to one's life? Perhaps only the pursuit of righteousness, toward which this book will also urge its readers through their increased compassion.

5.8 January 6, 2021: Rhetorical Empathy Meets a Crisis

      I turn now to a case study arranged not around a single rhetor but around a defined period of time–the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the United States capitol. For this section, I pulled posts for January 6 and the two subsequent weeks, eliminating those posted in the morning before the Stop the Steal rally began and those explicitly about other topics (e.g., COVID-19 case numbers). My examination of these posts leads me to two conclusions: first, that the writers in this study turned to empathy and endorsement as foundational strategies even in the starkest moment of the Trump years. Second, some writers chose this moment–when, to their minds, the support of white evangelicals for Trump was revealed as a blatant hypocrisy and Christian nationalism became, suddenly, a dominant paradigm for understanding that relationship–to cash in on the trust they had built through their practices of empathy and endorsement, and to make their most direct statements of disavowal and condemnation. Any commitment to foregrounding empathy and understanding has its limit; this event illuminates where and how some writers met theirs.

      Eleven of the thirteen writers made at least one post on or about January 6, 2021. Of the two who did not, Felix was the least prolific overall, and had no habit of responding to events in the news, and Beth reported that she spent much of the day of the insurrection watching coverage and crying–but she ultimately didn't post. Her husband, who works in law enforcement, didn't see the event as particularly significant–people protested, as people do. So "I don't know what to say to him. So what in the world am I going to say to my hundreds of Facebook friends? I really didn't know what to say about it. I almost still don't," she said, at an interview more than a year and a half after the event. It felt "baffling" to her that people around her didn't seem to care. "I don't know what to say to that–to convince you that it mattered a lot" that people died, that it was an attempted coup on our government. She went on to say that she doesn't want to be a person who jumps in just to speak, but really takes time to listen to what other people are saying and what the implications are

and post only when she can add something–but confronted with people who acted like it didn't even matter, it was difficult to figure out what to say.

The writers who did speak turned not only to familiar strategies, including those discussed in this chapter. Of 40 posts I identified as "writing back" posted within a week of the insurrection, 27 were affirmative shares of an article, post, tweet, or video the writer had sourced from another user like those discussed in this chapter; several white writers shared posts from prominent Black thinkers commenting on the racial politics of the event. The writers also turned to familiar symbols from their faith communities. While I don't have the systematic tools to make a comparative claim, I can say that the references to scripture made in this set of posts was notably high, perhaps in direct response to the insurrectionists' explicit use of religious symbols on that day. Several of the writers called specific attention to this. Ivy, for example, shared a January 6 Facebook post from Black Christian rapper Lecrae decrying insurrectionists' "idolatry." Two days later she reshared a post from the page of Phil Vischer, famous in evangelical circles as the creator of *VeggieTales*. It's a screenshot of a tweet from @jasonkeithallen, whom Phil identifies as president of Midwest Baptist Theological Seminary:

"But there have been other violent protests in the past yr."

Yes, but Wed was unlike anything in my lifetime. Why?

1. Place: US Capitol.

2. Instigator: US President.

3. Symbols: Crosses, Nooses, Confederate Flags, "Jesus Saves" signs.

3. Aim: overturn election.

God help us.

Vischer's caption notes that he thinks this tweet "sum[s] up perfection why yesterday was so deeply disturbing." Ivy offers no caption of her own. The post–her 13th on the topic in two days, six of

which also made explicit reference to the Bible, Christian leaders, or to religious symbols–was shared twice, and got a single "sad" reaction. Gabe also shared a screenshot of a tweet on his Facebook page which called attention to specific actions of insurrectionists, including brandishing confederate flags, mocking the death of George Floyd, and erecting a wooden cross and noose on the steps of the Capitol building.

Ivy was not the only participant who posted multiple times on or about January 6th, 2021. Alex posted about the insurrection twice. His first post on Facebook on the day itself was brief– "This is an insurrection against the United States of America *[sic]* federal government. This is unbelievable." Below the post, he pushed back on a commenter who drew an equivalence between the Stop the Steal rally-turned-riot and summer protests against police brutality–this is different, and more severe; "let's not normalize" a coup d'état. His second post was shared on January 11th, a nearly seven-minute video of uncertain provenance from a Facebook user who lives in the same region as Alex; it is possible but not certain that they know one another personally. Alex did not provide a caption. The original post attributes the words, but not necessarily the videography, to the poster's "friend Ben," who shared them earlier in the week: "Some people might hear politics in these words but I did not. I heard a challenge to examine my own life and my own aspirations. In the days since it was posted, I have had to confront 'blind spots' and idols of my own. I want to share this because it spoke to me. Maybe it will speak to you." The video shows a bearded white man, maybe 40 years old, doing chores around a farm in the early morning–chickens, pigs, sheep, a cat, several dogs, and a small child make cameos, while an instrumental version of the hymn "Be Thou My Vision" runs quietly in the background. The man sits briefly on a quilt-covered couch with a laptop, as the voiceover shares that "I don't post much these days," but I'm thinking of my local community and my disappointment:

I know you weren't there, and you would say you didn't condone what happened yesterday, and I believe you. What weighs on my heart, however, is what feels to me like the complete revocation of any claim white American Christians have to being a witness of the peaceable kingdom. This is a shameful chapter in the history of white American Christianity.

Many things could be said about this video, about the use of rural and agricultural imagery, about the ways the framing of the post Alex shared make this clearly carefully produced video sound like the spontaneous reflections of a local friend. It's a rich text. The post has more than 8000 views. But Alex himself–a man living in a rural community, who shares Anabaptist heritage with the speaker in the video–can by sharing and amplifying this voice associate himself with its reflective tone, the persona of a thoughtful person in regular conversation with the political other, someone who says explicitly that they respect and have learned from the deep faith of the people to whom he is speaking, and is humble about his own wisdom and insight: he references the "beams in my own eye" in Matthew 7, which warns against criticizing others when your own vision is distorted by sin. He asks, finally, that people think and pray about his statements about the idolatry of Trumpism, what Christians should stand for in American politics, and how they should advance their goals.

Alex's video post, sourced from and speaking to a rural community like his own, draws a firm contrast to Beck's tweets in form, platform, audience, and approach. Alex amplifies someone else's post, one in which vulnerability is a central tenet, and he trades on long-built trust to make a firm statement opposing the insurrection and white Christian nationalism in religious terms. He spoke in interviews of his consistent effort to personalize national issues for people who he says wouldn't tell anyone in their own deeply Republican county that they're too lazy for food stamps but would make that comment in general–"it's this fear, this fear of abstraction or conspiracy of corruption at a larger level that folks just can't get past." So "so some of the local resources then, I think, it gets to this, gets past this level of it's not, like these are not–it's not 'they' doing this. This is

the dude who goes to that church down the street, who runs the health department, telling you that we have a real problem even locally." After months of posting resources from the local government for small businesses affected by COVID-19 lockdowns, livestreams of his former church's services, infographics about masking and vaccination, and quotes and Bible verses supporting kindness and care for the poor, Alex determined that the insurrection was a "culmination" which required him to both call attention to and cash in that trust; it called for a different rhetorical stance. "It really was the sense that like, no, this is the step too far. I've held my tongue. I've been respectful… I've held the course and I've let folks comment and just let them be, but this one doesn't get to be–you don't get to normalize this." You have to see the way that violence like this will only "multiply hate."

Alex's interview comments almost exactly mirror one of Ivy's posts in mid-January 2021 about Trump's false claims of victory in the 2020 election and his support of the insurrectionists, for which she asked her Trump-supporting Facebook friends to answer:

> These past four years, I have tried to nake [sic] my Facebook a place where people of
>
> different beliefs can discuss their differences. I've tried to better understand Trump
>
> supporters because I may learn something.
>
> I have been tolerant.
>
> I have been patient.
>
> I have been respectful.
>
> Now all I can be is honest.

And while she took a very different tack, Kelly, too, emphasized the need for truthfulness about what had happened. In a January 7 post shared on both Facebook and Instagram, her only one on the subject, she wrote:

> I was going to say something about learning to celebrate Epiphany yesterday. Standing out in
>
> my mind is the hymn line 'mild He lays His glory by.' Yesterday in multiple ways the name

and cross of Jesus was profaned for the sake of earthly glory. Domestic terrorism, treason, idolatry, white supremacy, and a double standard. We who are Christian and/or American, but especially both, call it like it is. What is ours to repent, individually or collectively? Calling it like it is, for these writers, seems to mean a particular keenness about character. Assuming the best of their interlocutors is an important and constitutive rhetorical strategy as well as an ethical commitment—but that frame is rooted in the space of conversation. Donald Trump and the supporters who stormed the Capitol are third parties rather than discussion partners. The religious symbols at play at the insurrection represented, for these writers, a corruption of their faith, one so egregious and so obvious that it needed to be directly condemned, and one so egregious and so obviously that they could hope the audiences with whom they had built trust over long dwelling-together online might recognize it, too.

Not all the writers, though, followed this pattern. Beck, in particular, tweeted frequently about the insurrection, but took a much more punitive approach, sharing photos of rioters captioned with suggestions for the length of their prison sentence and referring to the insurrectionists in strongly pejorative terms. In fact, in the data collection phase, I'd chosen not to screenshot these posts—they did not seem to me to be directed to anyone in particular; they did not address religious features of the insurrection, nor did they use religious language to talk about the event. Their virulence was furthermore a sharp contrast to the rhetorical choices made by the other writers, who posted primarily on Facebook, which served for me as a further indication that "writing back" as a category is held together by the sincere presumption that someone you know and care about will see what you have posted. The rhetorical strategies reviewed in this chapter depend on a consequential overlap between the people you address in your social media posts and the people you encounter in your real life—at church, at school pick-up, at work, at family reunions, on a visit to your hometown—or that people you know and love encounter in similar sites. COVID lockdowns

might have shifted folks' sense of proximity to one another as well as some of the institutional sites or ties that brought them into contact, but writing back presumes that the writer's audience feels real to them, and the things you say impact relationships that matter to you. Beck's Twitter-bound, lock-'em-up posts did not fall into this category–for reasons of platform and personal distance, they weren't directing that anger at a community with which they were–on that platform, at least–in regular conversation.

This distinction furthermore indicates, however, that once writers find themselves on the outside–no longer writing to known evangelicals as an insider, but as one entirely alienated, or perhaps no longer in a position to write to known evangelicals at all–their rhetorical approaches necessarily change. Some may experience this as a sense of freedom–"I don't have to pretend to be evangelical anymore," as one friend told me, referencing his changing approach to activism after leaving a job at an evangelical institution. For others, though, the insider status was personally and rhetorically precious. One participant told me in both interviews that she thinks a great deal about how far she can stretch her credibility before she loses her audience. By the time of our second interview, she had lost faith that people might listen to her, in part because of the intensity of the rhetoric she encountered on social media:

> I think with how polarizing the last couple years have been, I think there's so many topics or phrases that people have become so sensitive to. And if that topic is just brought up or that phrase is used, it can kind of shut down the conversation… So I just have this sense that people probably listen less to conversations like that. Even if it's just online, thinking of people that I knew from growing up or even family members. And then also just personally, I'm always thinking–what is going to be the line? What is going to be the line for me of things that I share about or for people that I know or have a past with–what is going to be the thing that I talk about, and then they're going to be like, "That's it. She's super

progressive now"? Or just to lose that status of maybe kind of understand both sides, or

understand where we're coming from. Because bridging that gap is so important to me. And

I feel like maybe that's happened. Or if it hasn't happened now, then it will soon. Or maybe I

would just never know. But by talking about enough things, I would no longer be able to in

the same way, or to be seen or heard in the same way… But to reach certain people, I do

feel like it is really valuable for them to kind of see you as having this background, or

understanding them, or being really in the middle.

These extended comments call back to a pattern first noted in this dissertation's introduction–the

firm sense many writers had that they might be the only person who could reach some members of

their current or former communities within white evangelicalism. They also suggest a strong

awareness, culled in part from observations of social media, that this is a delicate position, and

perhaps an untenable one, because of the trajectory of the writer's own convictions, and because of

the well-documented pattern of white evangelicals casting out reformers who go "too far."[59] When

the writer is no longer seen as a trusted voice, their critiques and their endorsement will have little

purchase, and they will lose the small amount of influence they are so carefully leveraging for

change.

The posts collected in this case study serve to complicate the theses of this chapter; as I've

demonstrated here, while writers drew on some of the habits of this chapter in their responses to the

January 6, 2021 insurrection at the capitol–including empathy, vulnerability, and endorsement that

personalizes, extends, and particularly forwards the perspectives of people of color–they also

indicated in their posts and comments that this was a disruptive moment in a long and troubled year.

Because it comes so near the conclusion of my study window, I do not have the necessary data to

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[59] See, for example, Isaac B. Sharp's 2023 book, *The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians—and the Movement That Pushed Them Out.*

make before and after comparisons in rhetorical strategy; I can only point back to Chapter 3, wherein the study-eligible respondents raised the specter of nationalism in their definitions of white evangelicalism. The timing of that data collection–a year after they wrote the posts here–suggest waning and circumscribed hopes for the persuasive work of witness. By the time of their first interview with me in spring 2022, several of my study participants had chosen to pull back from social media as a result of their experiences during 2020 or the wider Trump years. Tyler had deleted Facebook and Beck ceased to use it; Jordan had taken a long break, others whom I contacted for interviews told me they weren't good candidates because they'd closed all their accounts. Comments like the extended quotation above, however, demonstrate that empathy and endorsement remain useful and valued frames for these writers. They had learned their limits–but still spoke of deploying them judiciously, and perhaps redirecting their efforts from social media toward other venues of conversation and engagement.

5.9 Conclusion

Over the course of 2020, participants deployed a range of strategies to engage white evangelical audiences, relying in particular on practices of empathy and endorsement to challenge those readers to consider alternative perspectives on faith and U.S. politics. As I addressed in this chapter's introduction, I found critique itself difficult to isolate in the dataset overall: strong statements of judgment did not frequently refer to evangelicalism by name–perhaps because they sought wider purchase among those Christians who would and would not use that label to describe themselves, perhaps because evangelicalism was the understood subject of the sentence, and perhaps because they intuited already that the word engendered more confusion, not less. In an environment in which "evangelical" is increasingly used as an indicator of party affiliation or right-wing politics, even by those who are not Protestant Christians (Burge, "Why 'Evangelical'"), it is difficult to parse

out "writing back" to participants' evangelical home communities from any other kind of generalized resistance to pro-life talking points, COVID denialism, or anti-vaccination influencers. A more purely social science examination might explore here what beliefs motivate that conflation for writer and audience; as a rhetorician, I emphasize instead my contention that the writers find this slippage useful. The lack of distinction between the Trump administration, Republican leadership, right wing political figures, evangelical celebrities and leaders, and evangelical laypeople as persons to whom critiques are addressed and of whom they are made—and furthermore the slippage between the tenets of groups like QAnon, the Republican party, and the evangelical mainstream, or even of more abstract nouns like "America," "society," and "culture"—is a feature, not a bug, of raised-evangelical writing back. It is, for the writers, a rhetorical challenge that any critique addressing that network of ideas and actors might be perceived as a comment or attack on any other part—but the elisions can also be a convenient rhetorical resource.

For many of the raised-evangelical writers in my dataset, a movement away from their family's politics creates corresponding distance from their religious communities and familiar religious practice. In their posts, America and evangelicalism warrant such similar critiques it's difficult to know to which entity they are referring. By directing critiques at "America," they can include self-identified evangelicals in their implied coalition of people justly concerned with the issue at hand and aligned against the problem. By directing critiques at "the Church" or "Christians," particularly those softened cautionary tales, they could widen the implied audience, yes, but also call that wider coalition to a greater fidelity to the justice their scriptures talk so much about. They can even adopt the tone and discourse norms of the many critiques of culture already part of church-based literacy practices, from sermons to the op-eds in *Christianity Today*. The elided definitions create, for the writer and their readers, an assumption of goodwill, moral authority, or both, which

operates alongside other strategies of rhetorical empathy to invite recalcitrant evangelical social media connections into alternative political expressions of their faith.

Their posts about January 6, 2021, indicate that these writers also thought a great deal about who in that target market was open to productive dialogue, and when the interlocutor was "too far gone." The window for productive engagement narrowed over the course of the year, and perhaps dramatically so after January 6. Who is a movable target? Who is open to influence? After Christy commented on her cousin's post to fact-check the erroneous claim that Antifa had staged the insurrection, she was unfriended. In the same week, Ivy blocked a family member who persistently defended the rioters. Like Olivia's firm policies on which friend requests to accept and Gabe's decision to stop responding to some of his frequent commenters, these post-insurrection social media experiences indicate that despite their ambivalence about the platforms and their commitment to rhetorical empathy, the writers had lines in the sand. They could and did choose to disengage when a commitment to truth presents a direct challenge to the operationalization of that empathy. (In Christy's words, describing a family member whose Facebook comments she stopped responding to: "we live in completely different worlds of fact.") Tim's offline experience of leaving his church in the summer 2020 might illuminate this calculus. His pastor didn't acknowledge the murder of George Floyd and was reluctant to engage when Tim raised concerns—and then asked Tim not to wear his Black Lives Matter t-shirt when he played in the worship band for their outdoor services. Tim said:

> I kind of had this view of myself as I was an opposing voice within the church, but I was heard, and that I had an influence. But I think I came to realize that maybe I saw that to be true, maybe that was a little bit through rose colored glasses… I think there was a lot of my experience at the church of like, "Oh, they tolerate me because they're trying to change me and fix me. We'll keep hammering at him until he finally breaks down and reaccepts that

penal substitutionary atonement is true, but until that day we have to accept everything he says with a grain of salt." This idea that I'm a tolerated voice, rather than a respected and heard voice that's actually influencing people. And that was part of the final straw. I mean, there's no positive reason for me to be here. I'm not accomplishing any of the goals of why I'm here and still experiencing all the negative emotional impacts of being here.

Without a live sense that a positive impact was possible, Tim chose to find a different congregation that, while further away in theological tradition and worship style from his childhood church, was more active in social justice work, including anti-racism and LGBTQ inclusion.

Long 2020 operates as an inflection point for many features of American religious and political life, particularly in networks with many nodes in the white evangelical world. Some writers had "final straws" with particular institutions and particular people to whom they were connected on social media, after which they chose to disengage; others made less stark a sense of what they'd experienced online and what it meant. In Chapter 4, I argued that the logic of accumulation activated by the hashtag movements of the 2010s shaped how raised-evangelical readers thought about social media, regardless of platform, and how they conceptualized persuasion. Here I assert that social media use–and in particular the experiences writers had of political talk online during the Trump era and 2020 in particular–has significantly shaped and reshaped the ways everyday political actors think about communication and identity. That reconsideration dovetails with the larger project I turn to in Chapter 6, this dissertation's conclusion: the writers in this study used social media to reconfigure their religious identities, finding, following, and sharing in alternative networks that might bolster new and different ways of being Christian.

Chapter 6 Resourcing Faith: Reconfiguring Networks for Religious Identity

6.1 Introduction

"I suppose it's possible that someday the Church will look at me with disdain on their faces and mock Twitter accounts from coffee shops and write doctoral dissertations on all the ways I did it wrong, and all I'll know how to say is I know and I'm sorry and I hope I learned to be kind."

–from *Out of Sorts* by Sarah Bessey; quote shared by Tim in a September 2020 Facebook post

Several times in the summer and fall of 2020, Tim interrupted his typical Facebook content–news articles about police brutality, YouTube renditions of hymns invoking God's justice, videos and slide decks from Black leaders on anti-racism–to share a photo of the book he was reading. The photos appeared to be taken on his phone while the book rested on his knees; the pages curve away from the camera, and the text is often not centered in the frame. The photo is captioned, typically, with just the name of the book and its author. In one case, he tags a friend and makes reference to a conversion they'd had the day before. In another, he gives context, spelling out the overall thesis of Brian McClaren's *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to Do About It.* That caption, though, is missing a closing parenthesis. It all gives the strong impression of a spontaneous decision, and of a reader struck by an insight and eager to share it. In an interview, Tim confirmed that he didn't spend time finessing these posts. "I'm not looking to be an influencer, to be someone who's driving clicks, or whatever," he said. "It's sharing things that I thought were helpful to me," that might make other people–people navigating the same tensions and questions–feel less alone.

In tandem with the ways that the writers in my study have pushed back on the political and religious orthodoxy of mainstream white evangelicalism, their 2020 social media writing participated in another project, and one that offers glimmers of insight into the futures of American Christianity

and its political expression. They used their social media accounts to form and reform networks of conversation and engagement that, in turn, made novel religious identities possible. I group posts like Tim's book photos under the category of "writing back" for several reasons. First, Tim is sharing explicitly religious content–passages about faith and doubt, theological statements about the crucifixion, meditations on the Lord's prayer–because that content helps him navigate tensions in his own faith; tensions that were in this period shaped by the unwillingness of his former church home to address the murder of George Floyd and the widespread protests in the weeks that followed. He directly expressed in our interview his hope that others in a similar position–those who were or are insiders to white evangelicalism but deeply disappointed by it–might find it helpful as they navigated dissonance and disappointment. It is, for him, an act of communication. But it is also an action that seeks to create or amplify an alternative to white evangelicalism's "ideologics" (Crowley) from theological positions to cultural norms.[60] Instead of an emphasis on certainty, Tim seeks greater comfort with what is impossible to explain: divinity, incarnation, God's goodness, human suffering.

In this chapter, this dissertation's conclusion, I respond directly to its driving question: "how do raised-evangelicals use social media writing to reconfigure their religious identities?" As in Chapters 3-5, I continue here to analyze data from participants, but I offer these conclusions as provisional claims, by which I mean that I see the arguments of this chapter as directions for further study. This study emerged from a tense and dramatic moment in American life, one in which many things felt terrifyingly or exhilaratingly possible. 2020, as metonymy for that moment, called into

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[60] I use Crowley's term, "ideologics," in this dissertation to describe the interconnections of beliefs and belief systems; Crowley coins this language in her analysis of apocalyptist strands of Christian fundamentalism in America to specifically consider the ways that "subscription to a given belief system forecasts and limits the ways in which new events and information can be read," and to posit alternatives to rationalist arguments against a particular belief that founder because of that beliefs' embeddedness in ideologies that "cohere below the level of consciousness" (77, 75).

question many assumed features of American life, from the stability of its democratic institutions and healthcare systems to the institutionalization of racist practices and the confederate monuments in many American towns and cities. In the world of American Christianity, as massive numbers of people reconsidered their relationship with church attendance prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic or the behavior of Christian leaders, many possible futures for young raised-evangelicals came into view. Those futures are still under negotiation. From 2020, the period under discussion, to 2021 and 2022, when interviews took place, and 2023, when the bulk of the writing of this project was done, study participants experienced shifts in religious belief and practice and in their online behavior. But I reassert the premise of this project: that their experiences of social media and the writing they did on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were part and parcel of their efforts to reconfigure their religious identities amidst massive uncertainty.

The texts and people with whom the writers in this study interacted on social media positioned and repositioned them in the landscape of American political and religious life. For Tim, that's Brian McLaren and Sarah Bessey; it's also the folks who interacted with his posts, the Facebook groups he joined, the discord server accompanying his favorite post-evangelical podcast. While he found and joined a new congregation after his 2020 church break-up, his sense of membership in a religious community also came from this constellation of media resources, creators, and Facebook friends. In this conclusion, I affirm networks as a tool for conceptualizing religious identity for American protestants in the digital age and for raised-evangelicals in particular. I then turn to two principles by which the writers in this study curated the networks through which they reconfigured new religious identities, affirming once again that it is not the content of their beliefs, but their curatorial practices, that link this group together. Finally, I recount indications from the data of what resources these writers engage to populate their networks, grouped under the heading "nodes." I conclude by discussing the implications of this research and what new questions it raises

for scholars, political analysts, and anyone with a stake in the future of American religious life–which is to say, all of us.

6.2 Networks

Scholars writing in the digital age are not the first to connect media engagement and religious identity. When Kristin Kobes Du Mez argued in her 2020 book, *Jesus and John Wayne,* that evangelical identity could be framed "in terms of the degree to which individuals participate in this evangelical culture of consumption," particularly the consumption of media, she drew on a centuries-old precedent. Reading and writing have long been linked to religious practice, and especially so for Christians in the Protestant tradition, which marks its schism from the Roman Catholic church with the belief that every believer should read the Bible for themself. In the Americas, Bibles and Psalters were used for reading instruction and comprehension from the colonial period, and literacy linked to holiness (Monaghan). In the late twentieth-century evangelicalism of my participants' childhoods, the Psalter was supplanted by James Dobson books, Christian Contemporary Music, *VeggieTales*, and a bustling publishing industry. Du Mez's phrasing–"the degree to which individuals participate"–and her comment that "there are those who rarely consume media produced outside of this world," from music to news, television to radio, evoke the network metaphor I deploy in this conclusion. Some operate entirely within the networks of white evangelical cultural production and the commercial activity that sustains it (Vaca). Some exist on their edges. Some, now, in response to new media forms, historical shifts, and their evolving political convictions, work out new religious identities by constructing networks that reach into and beyond the nodes of that web.

Social media is a more literally networked media form than the primers on which New England's colonists trained their literacy, one captured effectively by religious figures as well as other celebrities. In Chapter 5, I wrote at some length about the rise of influencer culture; I raise the

subject here only to underscore it with reference to the deeper history within white evangelicalism of celebrities, many of them pastors, from Billy Graham to Rick Warren to more recent–and scandal-ridden–figures, like disgraced former Hillsong New York pastor Carl Lentz, who for a time in the late 2010s appeared in paparazzi shots with Justin Bieber.[61] While the evangelical celebrities of the twentieth century were certainly not strangers to politics–Graham and Warren both advised presidents–the recent increasing politicization of the label 'evangelical,' addressed in Chapter 3, has further eroded the boundaries between evangelical celebrities and Republican political pundits. A number of pastors reached national prominence on the strength of their enthusiasm for Donald Trump's candidacy in both 2016 and 2020 (see, for example, *Religion News Service* reporting on Greg Locke, for example, including Smietana, "Tennessee preacher and MAGA celebrity claims YouTube has banned him"). The dynamics of influencer culture's intersections with evangelical celebrity are twofold: specific figures gain massive followings, and a wider number of perspectives vie for a user or believer's attention as the "porous boundaries of new media and network-based communities" challenge systems of authority that were built on "designated gatekeepers and static or controlled

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[61] In a 2022 book examining this history, journalist Katelyn Beaty contends that evangelicalism as a movement has a particular penchant for celebrity; early evangelists' emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ, plus their ability to draw large crowds, undermined the authority of local churches and denominations and with it the theological and behavioral accountability they might provide for preachers and parishioners. Protestants' fondness for schisming and the rise of nondenominational churches, too–and those denominationally- affiliated churches that substantially downplay their connection to any larger body–contributed to a sort of ur-identity for many American Protestants as *evangelical*, rather than a member of a particular church, or as Methodist, Presbyterian, Nazarene, or Pentecostal (see also Burge for discussion of social media's contribution to the rise of nondenominational Christians; Christerson and Flory for rise of independent leaders and "network Christianity" as an increasingly competitive alternative to denominations). As the epigraph to Chapter 3, a quote from a pilot study participant, suggests, raised-evangelicals born in the 1980s and 1990s learned to think of themselves as "just Christian," without recognition of the social location even of the broader evangelical movement. Race inflects this dynamic in profound ways–the figures I have named in this paragraph are exclusively white, reflective of the cultural power and racial prejudice of white evangelicals; the ecosystem of evangelical celebrity among Black, Latino/a, and Asian evangelicals includes both distinct figures and shares some crossover leaders with the white mainstream. For further discussion of evangelical celebrities, see also Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife;* Gaddini, "The Ideal Woman," in *The Struggle to Stay;* and Sheldon.

boundaries" (Campbell 8).[62] The effect in both cases, and across the political spectrum, is greater volatility in the believer's relationship to religious labels.

My participants, again, may or may not identify as evangelical now. Nonetheless, the formative literacy practices of their childhoods, from watching *VeggieTales* on VHS to reading Focus on the Family magazines to the strong association of reading–one's Bible, primarily, but also commentaries, theology books, memoirs, and texts advancing "Christian" or "Biblical" views on social issues–have transferred to their digital lives as adults. As evidenced by Tim's habit of screenshotting books, the analog practice of reading a hard copy from a Christian publishing imprint is still alive and well. But especially in 2020, his conversations about what he was reading and his reactions, reflections, and questions moved online. The impulse to screenshot and share did not, I'm sure, feel strange to Tim; he's been a user of Facebook since 2006, and well-accustomed to sharing pieces of his life and thinking on that platform. For the elder members of my study pool who came of age in the era of blogging, in particular, the internet itself has long been a source of curated spiritual and religious insight and one with a progressive edge: because blogging was a new medium, not subject to the theological or interpersonal gatekeeping of evangelical institutions like publishers, radio stations, and periodicals, many sidelined voices gained traction. Rachel Held Evans is perhaps the quintessential example of this; she is featured in Lisa Blankenship's book, which I cited heavily

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[62] Heidi Campbell has focused attention on religious digital creatives (RDCs), those marketing, public relations, and social media experts working within and beyond religious organizations, to consider how their digital work affords unprecedented influence over religious institutions heretofore reserved to–in the Christian contexts she examines– priests, pastors, and others in executive leadership. Campbell attends primarily to professionals, whereas this dissertation focuses on everyday adherents; nonetheless, her work points to the ways digital media has offered platforms to a greater number of perspectives than those historically afforded the chance to speak for and to religious leadership. Campbell's work also makes extensive use of Manovich's contention that computing has given rise to new "cultural interfaces" that frame reality as not static, but subject to engagement, interaction, and manipulation; users–people–are encouraged to investigate and experiment with the narratives and claims presented to them. In essence, the iterability of new media advances a cultural logic of uncertainty, instability, and constant change. While outside the focus of this project, I reference this theory here for its compelling resonance with Mannon's argument that xvangelical writers reframe spiritual maturity as endless exploration, and for its resonance with the framework for emerging religious identity I offer later in this chapter.

in Chapter 5, as host to conversations between gay Christian leader Justin Lee and readers who were conservative on civil and religious marriage equality. Her writing–on the blog and in her several bestselling books–came up several times in interviews as touchstone and a model that offered a different kind of Christianity than her–and their–intensely evangelical youth.

In other words, the networks writers curate shape their sense of what is true and what is possible, including what kind of religious identities are available to them. Their digital networks inform, resource, and reflect the networks they inhabit offline; they are not replacing so much as displacing older forms of religious engagement. Tim, for example, told me that he found himself in a particular congregation mostly because of the denomination's anti-racist and pro-LGBTQ stances–it didn't feel like home to him. He was, however, also active online in multiple Facebook groups, and– as this chapter shows–engaged the work of writers from a variety of Christian traditions as he negotiated his new position in the shifting landscape of American Christianity. Denominational affiliation or church attendance might be more easily captured by survey measures, but Tim's religious identity as he understood it was framed not so much by those features of his religious life as by the writers, thinkers, and influencers whose work he engages online.

I want to furthermore suggest that religious authority is also networked, for these participants; the folks whose posts they share, or about whom they make posts, offer new touchstones to supplement or replace the anchor of a local congregation and its leadership. They also connect these writers, who may feel–particularly during periods of restricted activity during the COVID-19 pandemic–that they are alone in their views, with others who share their opinions or experiences, and in the case of writers, thinkers, and pastors with some online prominence, help to legitimize those views and demonstrate alternatives or expansions of the religious identity constructs

most readily available locally. Using network[63] rather than denominational affiliation or theological

position as a frame for religious identification does not, of course, offer statisticians much traction.

It's difficult to operationalize in a survey question. However, I suggest that it offers unique purchase

for researchers seeking to understand the shifting landscape of American Christianity in the post-

Trump era, a time in which religious activity and engagement cannot be separated from adherents'

digital life.[64]

6.3 Principles for Curation

Having established networks as my frame for religious identity, I turn now to the question of

definition. In this dissertation, I have collected the stories of writers who were raised in white

evangelical communities that were or are now much more politically conservative than the writers

are now. The writers in this study are also religiously different from those communities in a way I

have found difficult to articulate precisely, given their wide range of affiliations and views. To

identify the common threads among the religious identities this cohort of raised-evangelicals has

used their writing to configure, I once again invoke the work of Bethany Mannon of which I have

made much productive use in this dissertation: Xvangelical bloggers, who like my participants have

moved away from evangelicalism, frame spiritual growth as "deeper exploration" rather than ever-

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[63] As a conceptual frame for religious identity, the term "networks," also offers opportunities to make profitable use of several fields of scholarship, including rhetorical and digital studies. Much has been made of rhetoric's "ecological turn," which Dan Ehrenfeld contends has "productively complicated traditional mappings of publics and counterpublics" and enabled scholars to destabilized earlier frameworks of rhetorical situation (e.g., Bitzer) to model contingency and complexity. That ecological turn, in concert with Latourian theory and new understandings in the natural sciences, emerges from a contemporary interest in complex systems rather than single actors, and therefore complex webs of cause and effect. Scholars have lately critiqued this frame for rhetorical studies as deemphasizing the specificity of historical and rhetorical contexts, and of course it makes it difficult to frame a case well enough to study it with any particularity—but it has enabled the field to better respond to changes in information technology and to think about the distribution and transformation of information on the internet.

[64] While methods of this kind are outside my own area of expertise, I surmise that network analysis might allow digital studies scholars to engage this contention and gain further information into how raised-evangelicals might be categorized and understood according to the Christian and post-Christian commentators with whom they engage on social media.

greater certainty. I also build here on my argument that religious identity might be understood in terms of a network of media consumption and engagement, the conversation partners with whom a writer interacts in their Kenneth Burke-an parlor discussion about God, faith, and politics. In that vein, I turn not to the content of the writers' beliefs but the principles that guide the curation of those networks. In this section, I lay out two terms as important touchstones for these writers not only in their approach to social media, but in the religious identities they renegotiate through their "writing back." The first, *engagement*, emphasizes an openness to interactions and ideas beyond the familiar, while *discernment* responds to the demands of that kind of epistemic humility–when you replace certainty with curiosity, a capacity to understand and evaluate competing claims to truth becomes one mark of a seasoned faith.

I came to these particular terms for several reasons. Immersion in the data honed my sense of what it was that participants were most troubled by, what had led them to the complicated and varied senses of displacement they experienced, and what patterns of present conviction and practice this often-idiosyncratic group of writers had in common. Beyond the sampling characteristics they had to meet to participate in the study, what they shared was an awareness of their own evolution; each of them had changed their minds about what it meant to love God and love your neighbor, to use a common paraphrase of both Matthew 22 and Mark 12. And each person was ready to tell me how. While my interview protocols asked a series of questions about the religious and political background of their childhood, and then about their contemporary beliefs and affiliations, I didn't really need all four items. The first question on its own would prompt a wide-ranging story about what it was like to be raised to believe something they no longer held to be true. Encounters with difference–discussed in the higher education literature as "diversity experiences"– often prompted a reevaluation with the ideologies that dominated their church and family life, a subject I reviewed in Chapter 3. Many used strikingly similar language to describe this experience. A

common narrative structure went something like this: "I was told X about other people, and it turned out not to be true–what else isn't true?" Beck used this structure for their comments about LGBTQ people ("huh, they're not horrible people like I was told, so maybe the other stuff I was told about them was also wrong") and Anya echoed him uncannily in her comments about people of other faiths ("You're fed stories about people and then when you see that they're wrong, you start questioning, okay, that story was wrong. What other stories have I been told that have been wrong?"). Participants used this narrative structure to describe experiences where they discovered that what they had been taught was untrue–Ivy described learning that what she'd been told about the origins of Islam was both false and related to tropes used to justify enslavement and discrimination against Jews–"I became very angry when I found that out later in life." She furthermore told me that learning about the politics of Biblical translation as an adult, especially translation decisions used to justify homophobia, "broke a lot of trust." The narrative echoes, too, in descriptions of experiences where leaders or role models acted in ways that contradicted what participants had believed to be the values of their faith. A number of them brought up abortion as the defining political issue of their childhood, and the dissonance they experienced when vocally pro-life people enthusiastically supported the invasion of Afghanistan, spoke ill of immigrants and refugees, lambasted Black Lives Matter, and voted to cut social programs for poor families. In these cases, the false story was one about Christians themselves. To paraphrase: "I thought we were the kind of people who helped those in need," or "I thought we believed every human life was valuable. Was I wrong?"

Elements of these stories are part of every bildungsroman–the protagonist discovers that things, or people, are more complicated than they had once seemed. But I outline them here in order to suggest the exigence for each participants' renegotiation of their religious identity, and why *engagement* and *discernment* emerge as curatorial principles for these writers, guiding the interactions

224

they have with friends, family members, writers, pastors, influencers, and ideas online and in "real life." These principles are, I argue, points of emphasis in no small part because of the critiques of white evangelicalism outlined in Chapter 3–which is to say, they are important to the raised-evangelical writers in this population precisely because they do not see them in contemporary manifestations or leaders of the religious tradition in which they were raised. Critiques of evangelicalism's obsession with purity and certainty, absolute rules for behavior and simple stories of cause and effect, and its deep suspicion of anyone "outside the fold" prompted these writers to messier and more conversational approaches; critiques of hypocrisy produce a corresponding preoccupation, in raised-evangelicals, with integrity. Their stories of betrayal start as dissonance between an inherited worldview and the world they experience; they also depend on the writer's capacity to take their experiences and the experiences of others as evidence to the figurative contrary of what they'd been raised to believe.

When I say that the writers in my study value *engagement*, I mean that they seem to desire and to enact a religious identity that is grounded in the world around them. Instincts I would describe as pluralistic and ecumenical were present in participants' writing and their interview comments; scholars of those intellectual traditions would likely find good traction among this cohort. This is a strong contrast to the isolationist strains within evangelicalism and to Christian nationalism, the increasing potency of which Chapter 5's discussion of the January 6 insurrection underscores. Rather than viewing themselves as "set apart" or in unique command of the truth, participants tended to think and talk about themselves as members of publics beyond the church, and they also thought and talked about themselves as responsible to and for the lives of others outside the fold of white evangelicalism, with–to invoke a phrase from Catholic social thought–a preferential option for the poor. I saw this broad concern for the well-being of others in the stories recounted above, in which participants raised in aggressively "pro-life" communities remembered and critiqued the politics of

their elders, which presumed that poverty was a failure of effort or will. I further saw this in the stories about encounters with difference mentioned above, which indicated to each writer that their home community did not have a monopoly on truth, virtue, or vitality.[65] Anya's comments in particular are instructive here:

> something that we were told, growing up, was that everyone outside of the church was dead. Like that was kind of like everyone else is, you know–we're the only ones who are alive, we're alive in Christ, and everyone else needs to be made alive. But that wasn't what I experienced.

Describing her Muslim friends, she said that "I experienced aliveness in those people, just deep love."

One could argue that engagement–at least, if we append the adjective "political," is a mainstay value in most iterations of American evangelicalism, heavily mobilized to vote on behalf of favored candidates and policies. Yet while the participants were, generally speaking, active voters, I use engagement with a wider aperture: a religious identity oriented around engagement is one that strives to take seriously the lives and experiences of people outside of the participants' narrow home tradition. This impulse showed up both in the way they thought about using social media to learn from and engage with others–see, for example, Ivy's comments in Chapter 4 about the Facebook posts of her trans friend–and in the posts they wrote and shared. This posture could be seen in explicit invitations for engagement: in the throes of spring 2020 lockdowns, Alex explicitly solicited stories of what people had learned from others, asking his Facebook friend to "Tell me a story about a time when human interaction with a stranger left a meaningful positive impression on you or

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[65] Interactions with friends, classmates, and coworkers from other traditions within the evangelical umbrella could have a similar effect–Tim mentioned developing an appreciation for liturgical worship when he left his more charismatic church to attend a Christian college in the reformed tradition.

positively impacted your worldview." But the principle undergirded even playful social media activity. Olivia reported thinking about this in a photo she shared the week of the election of her daughter playing with a friend, a visibly Asian kid who lived down the street. It was maybe too subtle for anyone to pick up on, she noted, and in fact I did not identify and capture this post as an example of "writing back"–but it's another "way of showing pictures of people who are different than them, people who look different and have a different reality" and emphasizing to her more conservative Facebook friends that these people, too, are very literally our neighbors.

With *engagement* I emphasize the people with whom participants chose to populate their networks; with *discernment*, I extend this thinking to emphasize how participants chose to respond to the varied perspectives and ideas those people might bring. Each had already at least once allowed new information, ideas, and experiences to impact their thinking; their ongoing openness was a matter of conviction. The writers were, in general, people who valued being well-informed about current events and interacted with the social media posts of local politicians, for example; they posted about where to get good information about COVID case numbers and mitigation measures, mail-in voting, and mutual aid. Many also reported and evidenced reading widely, listening to podcasts, and engaging in other almost-academic literacy practices. Learning, analysis, and critique were also invoked in service of the dignity of others; in Christy's post profiled in Chapter 4, for example, she pushes back on inaccurate ideas about human trafficking, setting forth not only an argument that her white evangelical friends and followers should care about the accuracy of the claims they support and spread, but also that they should particularly care about whether their efforts to address suffering are effective and efficient. The curatorial practice of discernment is not only about populating one's networks with valued conversation partners, but also about weighing and analyzing the perspectives they share.

Discernment also implies a kind of savvy about when and how to respond. In this dissertation, I have reviewed numerous instances in which the writer chooses not to post about a given subject or chooses not to engage with a particular commenter, all cases in which the writer indicates a high religious and moral value on the capacity to evaluate multiple rationales and choose a response that, given the available information, is most likely to preserve and advance the well-being of all parties. This is, in my reading, a response to the kind of moral absolutism that they experienced from within white evangelicalism, in particular strong behavioral prohibitions around abortion, sex outside of heterosexual marriage, swearing, alcohol, and theological lines in the sand.[66] Engaging the lives, experiences, and perspectives of varied others in fact requires this kind of moral and theological reasoning; if a Christian self-consciously accepts sources of wisdom beyond the Protestant scriptures and their home community's accepted interpretations, discernment becomes a necessary feature of spiritual maturity. Some of the writers' comments and posts presupposed this: Olivia's expressed commitment to exposing herself to a lot of viewpoints, detailed in Chapter 4, depends on the assumption that a diversity of perspectives is not a threat to Christian truth. In fact, it presupposes a model of Christian faith in which the mature believer can–with the help of spiritual disciplines like "Facebook hygiene"–distinguish with some accuracy between what is true and what is not, and between what is godly and what is not.

For these writers, a religious identity emerging from a network curated through *engagement* and *discernment* is one that evolves in response to new information and is accountable to it. In part, I suggest that engagement and discernment are about building a faith that takes suffering seriously, and takes that suffering as instructive. At least one interviewee invoked the adage, adapted from

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[66] A philosopher might investigate this shift as one from a Kantian ethic to a more utilitarian or particularist moral framework; recent work on virtue ethics could likewise be fruitfully engaged by scholars in the fields of philosophy and religion to consider more granularly how similar populations evaluate ethical tensions around political talk within their social networks.

Matthew 7, that "you will know them by their fruit"–the way we behave reveals our character, and furthermore the quality of our theological and political convictions. If our theologies or politics contribute to the suffering of others, those convictions are and should be reconsidered. This premise was, for many, hard-won–many of the writers shared with me personal stories of experiencing harm because of their white evangelical communities' views on women's roles, on sexuality, on race, poverty, or propriety. Several, also, shared stories of interacting with fellow Christians from communities even more conservative than their own and feeling ostracized or judged. It was, so often, an experience of "bad fruit" that led them to renegotiate their convictions and the identities and networks they had configured, and to seek new conversation partners within and beyond the Christian tradition.

6.4 Nodes

Participants in my study, and particularly those with unstable or adversarial relationships with embodied Christian leaders including pastors of the churches they were attending or had attended in the past, turned to the internet for resonant spiritual wisdom and to affirm–as Tim implies in the opening case of this chapter–that they were not alone in their uncertainty or in their convictions. Having established networks as a useful tool for understanding contemporary religious identity in that cohort and sketched two curatorial principles guiding the religious identities of raised-evangelicals, I turn now to consider what indications my data provide for defining the content of those networks. I offer each of these sub-phenomena as a direction for future research. This dissertation did not set out with a focus on source material, nor on the media consumption and engagement of study participants; it nonetheless emerged as a significant contributor to participants' critiques of white evangelicalism (Chapter 3), their thinking about social media (Chapter 4), and their rhetoric on their chosen platforms (Chapter 5). This conclusion underscores the circularity of

literacy as practiced in update culture(Gallagher): because so much of the writing my participants did responded to the media they consumed by reading or viewing, future research will need to employ creative digital ethnographic methods to absorb what readers see, how they develop their intuitions about what's happening in their religious and political worlds and why, and how those fundamental assumptions shape writing like the posts this dissertation considers.

As the below "nodes" demonstrate, participants' curation of new and sustaining networks for their religious life lead some of them to historical Christianities, including ancient saints and mystics, to the distinctiveness of a denominational tradition as a contrast to mainstream evangelicalism, or to perspectives from Christian traditions beyond their own. For others, high profile dissenters with evangelical origins modeled paths forward. Many took an additive approach, using and stretching evangelical authorities alongside an eclectic group of novel religious figures to confer authority on their own arguments, or to point a way forward into new ones. All of these sources provide rhetorical resources to articulate a Christianity unbound by the assumptions of white evangelicalism. In this section, I outline two groups as possible directions for that scholarship: first, I address references to those evangelical resources participants have amended or reframed, and second, those nodes beyond evangelicalism that their networks have expanded to engage. Finally, I turn to a case study examining the rhetorical practices of one participant whose habit of sharing Facebook content illuminates the network with which he reconfigures his religious identity.

6.4.1 Evangelical Resources, Reinterpreted

6.4.1.1 Scripture

While not an exceptionally frequent practice, I found it nonetheless notable that some participants engaged in direct discussion of scriptural interpretation on their pages. Twelve of the thirteen participants quoted scripture at least once in the data collected for the study, and the

thirteenth posted publicly about her church's Bible study; some made quotations from the Bible a regular part of their social media posting. The recontextualization of Scripture passages emerges as a notable pattern that both tethers these writers to the values of their evangelical childhoods and the learned habit of Biblical interpretation but also enables them to rearticulate and invoke the authority of scripture and of God to support the convictions that distance them from their communities of origin. Some of the quotations collected in my dataset are humorous–Felix quoted John 7:37 ("Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink") to caption a photo of a cheeky nativity set made of coke bottles. Some are sardonic; for example, Beck's habit, discussed in Chapter 4, of tweeting verses at Republican officials that undermined their claims to Christian righteousness.

Some of the most interesting uses of Scripture, to me, are the longer-form discussions of how Christians ought to read and interpret a specific passage, and what the stakes of those interpretations are. Tyler does this in a tweet thread from September 2020, critiquing a pastor who said that Moses "got into a bad situation," referring to the account in Exodus in which Moses kills a man, covers it up, and runs away to Midian. Tyler wonders if American Christians are quick to gloss over the sins of their contemporary leaders because they've normalized that behavior among men of the Bible, rather than taking the flaws of those "heroes of the faith" more seriously. He then speculates that it's the prophet Jonah who best represents the American church–someone who received a direct command to God to preach to his enemies, but couldn't set aside his own resentment to accept God's mercy toward a people he didn't want God to save. The participants' habit of invoking literal application of Jesus' commands–to care for the poor, for example, or to turn the other cheek–as well as statements about wealth is a particularly evocative area for future study. As with the example above from Tyler, Gabe extensively quoted and discussed interpretations of Scripture. As I recount in the case study below, he made reference in his 2020 posts to Jesus' cautions about the pursuit of wealth. Beck did this too, and a number of posts in the dataset critique

America as a wealthy society that rejects the needs of the poor and/or speak about wealth accrued through exploitation.

As these Christians, raised on evangelical values of Biblicism and inerrancy and taught to take the Bible literally–particularly on issues of gender and sexuality–evolve in their political and social views, they seem to maintain a high value on the Bible and in particular on the words of Jesus. Religious studies scholars and literacy scholars might together explore how shifts in religious identity among this population track changes in their relationship to the tradition's sacred texts. Compelling projects might map which passages are most frequently cited by members of this religious cohort– perhaps in contrast to more conservative evangelical social media users–and how those passages are applied to political, economic, and social issues. Survey researchers might put these framings to experimental use, identifying what kinds of Scripture-based political messaging is persuasive, to whom, and on what topics.

6.4.1.2 Evangelical Mainstays

I wrote in Chapter 3 that we might update the adage that "an evangelical is anyone who likes Billy Graham" to define a raised-evangelical as anyone who grew up watching *VeggieTales*. In that vein, I note that readaptations of safely and recognizably evangelical rhetoric resources beyond the Bible, already detailed above, also cropped up in the networks of textual circulation my participants employed. Kelly, for example, made use of C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters,* an epistolary novel in which a senior demon writes to a junior one with instructions about how to confuse, distract, and tempt his human quarry away from God: "I'm pretty sure Screwtape would just love Christians saying things to each other like 'you're not a Christian if you vote for ____.'" Her allusion here suggests that people using this rhetoric might be working against God's kingdom, while also softening that critique: you may have been tempted into this divisive or critical statement, and could, with God's help, take a more empathetic and righteous approach to your fellow Christians. Tyler

tweeted out a thread about Lewis's most famous fictional series, *The Chronicles of Narnia,* treating it almost as he does the stories of Moses and Jonah in the example referenced above and applying the allegory of *The Magician's Nephew* to racist rhetoric in contemporary American politics.

Posted hymn lyrics, shared articles from *Christianity Today* and even Gabe's post from conservative pastor John MacArthur, discussed in Chapter 5, might also be effectively grouped here; all of them use evangelical resources to suggest alternative paths for evangelical Christians. Other practices in this vein might include Kelly's posts about adding books by and about Black and indigenous people to the Christian homeschool curriculum she used with her children, an indication that she does not take the homeschool curriculum as authoritative or sufficient, and in fact seeks to amend the mainstay resource rather than simply recontextualizing or reinterpreting it. Other scholars might tease out these approaches: the additive, or the reclamatory, and consider what kinds of interpretative practices sustain what kinds of religious identities and politics. Particularly striking is the exegetical approach to texts like C.S. Lewis's speculative fiction; while some scholarship has already explored phenomena like the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text,* which employs the monastic traditions like lectio divina to reflect on J.K. Rowling's famous fantasy series (e.g., Cusack et al.) further work might be done about how raised-evangelicals' literacy practices around these allegorical or dystopian texts intersect with their scriptural interpretation.

6.4.2 Post-evangelical Dissenters

Tim's posts about Sarah Bessey points to one node in the network of post-evangelical dissenters some participants turned to in order to resource their adult faith; Bessey has been and is yet, at time of writing, heavily involved in the Evolving Faith conference, billed as a gathering for "the misfits, the wanderers, the curious, the questioning, the spiritual refugees" (evolvingfaith.com). Tim also posted the Evolving Faith podcast's episode with Jen Hatmaker, in which the blogger and

author discussed her dismissal by evangelical institutions after she publicly shared her belief that LGBTQ marriages can be holy, alongside other statements affirming inclusion for LGBTQ Christians (Merritt). The thumbnail shared with Tim's post included the episode description: "Jen Hatmaker was the darling of evangelical Christian women until the price of belonging became her integrity." Tim captioned it: "I needed this desperately today."

Others in this family of personalities include Shane Claiborne, the activist whose books *The Irresistible Revolution* (2006) and *Jesus for President* (2008) were bestsellers at the time many participants were in middle school, and Rachel Held Evans, who was likewise a prominent author and blogger prominent from the mid-2000s until her early death in 2019 and a comparatively early public voice for LGBTQ inclusion in the church. There were not particularly robust patterns in invocation of these figures–Alex, Gabe, and Beck posted references to Claiborne; Gabe shared two quotes from Evans–so the resources to which writers turn is likely mediated by their position in the evangelical world as children including denominational affiliation and birth year. However, as indicated by projects like the Evolving Faith conference and the robust network of podcasts, Substack writers, and growing number of books by and for raised-evangelicals questioning their childhood faith, there are substantial if fraught efforts underway to organize around alternatives to conservative white evangelicalism. Studies examining online debates about the boundaries of these communities and their racial politics could prove instructive, as might ethnographic work on related events and conferences, for scholars attempting to chart what kinds of experiments in religious community organizing provide viable alternatives for practitioners disenchanted with white evangelicalism's rightward drift. In addition, scholars might examine how the rhetorical stances addressed in this dissertation translate to embodied settings, including those events, church communities, and in-person family dialogue about religion and politics.

6.4.3 Non-evangelical Traditions

In keeping with the practice of drawing on sources beyond the approval of white evangelical institutions and gatekeepers, I also noted participants consistently drawing on non-evangelical Christian traditions in their religious writing. I make a debatable claim here that this reach for non-evangelical traditions includes those posts that share material from sources referencing or affiliated with denominations that might be classified by Pew and other research bureaus as "evangelical protestant." I see these efforts, though, not as engaging a tradition inside the evangelical movement, but engaging the distinctiveness of Christian traditions as an alternative to the main thrust of evangelical culture in the United States. For the two who did this most frequently–Gabe, who shared content from his own Nazarene church and affiliated pages, and Alex, who made reference to his own anabaptist heritage and its pacifist commitments on several occasions–it seemed to be something like a return to their own roots. Perhaps like references to ancient Christianities–Alex, for example, also shared an icon of St. Patrick and attributed prayer in March–these writers were seeking to access older forms of Christian belief and practice that were not bound to the politics of 21st century America; perhaps, too, invoking an identity as 'Nazarene' or 'Mennonite' facilitates the writer's efforts to build a religious identity beyond evangelicalism.

Ecumenical examples included citations of Catholic thinkers, among them Tim, posting an excerpt from *The Holy Longing* by Catholic priest and theologian Ronald Rolheiser, and Christy, who celebrated an April 2020 *New York Times* opinion piece on the pastoral work of Dominican friars at a locked down Manhattan nursing home. Ivy posted about her formative experiences in Catholic school, good and bad, to push back on arguments that called then-candidate Joe Biden's Catholic faith into question; a few days later, she shared a piece from *Baptist News Global* on Bible translation and Biblical language for homosexuality. She also shared posts positively recognizing groups and thinkers affiliated with the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the Episcopal Church. Gabe and Alex both posted versions of a viral "Prayer for Putting on a Face

Mask," attributed variously to Presbyterian and Episcopal communities. Gabe shared a tweet thread from a Pentecostal detailing Black leadership in the 1906 Azusa Street revival and critiquing Sean Feucht's plans to break COVID lockdown rules to hold a worship service on the same location.

This is not an exhaustive list, of course–but it offers some evidence that the writers in the study firstly feel a freedom to affirm and draw from traditions outside their own, that they have positive if vague views of mainline Protestant traditions whose leaders take more progressive stands on social issues, and that–for all its complications–they may be seeking a sense of specificity and historicity in their religious affiliation that evangelicalism does not provide. The above references explore Christian traditions, but I also note here that I was struck by the number of explicit references to other Abrahamic faiths. At least one of the participants had Jewish family members; she posted a photo of her dreidel earrings for Hanukkah 2020. Anya, who had been involved in interfaith work before the pandemic and spoke of the spiritually and theologically transformative experience of her friendships with Muslims, posted several times with references to other religious traditions. Her Easter 2020 post referenced that year's coincidence of religious holidays for Jews, Muslims, and Christians:

> This month, all Abrahamic religions will reflect on spiritual tensions as we collectively navigate a time of physical tension. My hope is that as we leave this time together, we maintain the sense of urgency to act as light in darkness, create beauty in desolation, and instill hope where there is fear.

Future religious studies researchers may find traction among this population for questions about interfaith engagement and how younger Christians understand and present religious difference, particularly in their political engagement.

6.5 Gabe: Sharing Memes and Confessing Sin

This conclusion's only profile addresses the online behavior of Gabe, a prolific poster during the study time period who engaged in many of the practices featured in this review. Gabe was a very active Facebook user during the 2020 data collection period, with indications that throughout the Trump years, he'd posted regularly–sometimes several times a day–and a significant portion of those posts were shared from other users and pages or screenshotted from his Twitter feed. As a parent of young children, too, he has some patterns in common with Kelly and Beth, both profiled in Chapter 4–he posted about the songs and books his kids were into and posted, shared, or was tagged by his spouse in family photos. Most of his activity in this time fell into a few loose categories: stuff about beloved media, stuff about church, and stuff about COVID. More than any other participant, with the exception of Ivy, Gabe participated in fandoms and demonstrated a sort of Tumblr sensibility[67] about his Facebook use, reposting figures like John Green and Hank Green plus content about *Star Wars* and 90s shows like *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Saved by the Bell.* As with Beth, the frequency of his posting suggested that Gabe had a lower threshold than other participants for deciding to share content he appreciated–part of his persona was being "extremely online," so Facebook friends might encounter his content frequently in a way that garnered him greater attention on that platform.

Despite the lighthearted content he shared, Gabe would also be known to those Facebook friends as a man with a potent sense of righteous anger–about people sharing the viral "Plandemic" conspiracy video, the murder of Breonna Taylor, violence against store clerks and waitstaff enforcing lockdown restrictions, and the many other explosions of conspiracy and violence during

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[67] For erudite discussion of fandom and fan discussion on tumblr, including rhetorical features like interpretations of characters, see e.g., Adrienne Raw, *Mediating and Mediated: Fandom Discussion, Knowledge-Making, and the (Re)Shaping of Fannish Realities.*

that year–leading him to advance a different message than some of the other participants discussed in this chapter. While Beth, for example, wanted primarily to communicate that Christians can hold a wide variety of political positions–even liberal ones–with integrity (see Chapter 5), Gabe emphasizes that the God of Christianity does, in fact, assert very specific principles that should govern the political activity of God's followers.

Gabe's sharing practices indicated that he had built a robust digital network of progressive Christian writers, pastors, and groups who likewise reinterpreted evangelical resources or populated his feed with thinking from post- and non-evangelical sources. More than any other participant, Gabe shared material about the Bible, including posts that interpreted and recontextualized passages as challenges to conservative politics and the social order. One such post is a meme from the page "The Christian Left," featuring a two-panel image of Jon Stewart at a news desk which reads: "Free market capitalism is on the side of the Lord! Who says you can't serve both God and money? Who would say such a thing?" The next frame includes a floating image of Jesus captioned by "You cannot serve both God and money, Matthew 6:24." In October 2020, he shared a long post from pastor and cultural critic JR Forasteros which goes back to translations of the Hebrew to argue that American Christians have misinterpreted the phrase "King David was a man after God's own heart," in order to argue "we can excuse" the policies and behavior of politicians because they claim to be Christian. Donald Trump and his famous campaign trail conversion–as well as other publicly devout figures like Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz–are the obvious targets of this critique. The post ends with this language:

> Character matters to God. And policy matters to God–Israel's prophets will often and loudly
> condemn the religious and political establishments for their failure to care for the
> vulnerable. I am all for politicians who seek to have a heart/mind like God. Let's seek out
> candidates who are quick to listen and slow to anger. Politicians who care for the widow, the

orphan, the immigrant. Those who hate unjust courts and show preference for the

overlooked.

This is deeply religious rhetoric in perhaps its most classical form–an argument made through interpretations of a holy scripture. By sharing this post and others like it, Gabe establishes a common ground with evangelical social media connections by invoking the classically evangelical tenet of *biblicism* (see Bebbington's quadrilateral in Chapter 3): I, too, care deeply about and submit myself to the authority of Scripture. He communicates a desire he can assume they share: for leadership that reflects Christian values, and in particular those politicians who have a "heart/mind like God." And then he redefines the content of that shared assertion, arguing that what it truly means for politicians to enact God's vision for the world is care for widows, orphans, immigrants, and the overlooked.

Gabe's internet activity includes snarky memes, nostalgia content, and a lot of shared news articles, but also constant reminders of his religious affiliation: he shares from pages like "Nazarenes United for Peace" and "The Christian Left," articles from high-profile Christian institutions like *Christianity Today* and tweets from leaders like Shane Claiborne and Eugene Cho, posts from pastors and theologians affiliated with his home tradition. Alongside these consistent indications of his commitment to his faith and his denomination, invoking Biblical instructions for godly living implicates him, too. As the post quoted in Chapter 5's introduction indicates, Gabe would be the first to admit that he fell short of his aspirations of patience and graciousness in some of his Trump-era Facebook activity. The pre-vaccine days of the pandemic were particularly challenging; like many Americans, and perhaps Americans with evangelical family members in particular, he faced disagreements with loved ones about how to assess and mitigate the risks of contracting COVID-19. "In the latter half of 2020 going into 2021, occasionally, I would just be in these moods where I'd just be like–'I want to argue with somebody. I want to yell at somebody,'" he told me. "And then I

would just get tired as soon as somebody replied or commented, I'd just be like, 'Ah, this is pointless. This is stupid. I don't actually want this. I was just upset.'" But his consistent appeals to Scripture–via Jon Stewart meme, shared long-form posts by other pastors, and his own occasional first-person reflections on events in the church's liturgical calendar–as a moral authority for political engagement reminded evangelical readers of Gabe's knowledge of and commitment to his faith, building an ethos even as he expressed regrets and caution about trusting any messenger too far. In December 2020, after the initial turmoil of COVID lockdowns, protests, and the presidential election, he shared a Spectator article about celebrity pastors captioned with a pull quote: "Making yourself a very public representative of God, rather than a humble messenger, is a dangerous business when you are–like all of us–a very flawed human being."

6.6 Implications

This dissertation has sought to understand how raised-evangelical social media writers used social media to reconfigure their religious identities, with a focus on "long 2020," a tumultuous year in American life. Like all attempts at examination, it has also raised new questions beyond its scope. I have nodded above to some of the more particularized indications that piqued my interest and that I commend to other scholars interested in the media engagement and social media activity of this or a related cohort of religious Americans; here I zoom out once again to consider the stakes and implications of the arguments that I have made.

The first implication to which I draw attention is this: it is possible, and fruitful, to study raised-evangelicals as a cohort of religious Americans. Researchers would again struggle to isolate raised-evangelicals as a group based on survey questions–even among the Christians, there are those who would call themselves evangelical, and those who might select other varieties of Protestant, and some who would answer "none," because the given labels don't make much sense of their

relationship to institutions of the church. It is because of that instability of terminology that ethnographic and qualitative projects are particularly necessary at this moment. I caution, though, against the temptation to define the group solely in terms of formative childhood experiences, a formulation that my own term, raised-evangelical, implies. However, rooting an identity in reaction to a common past foregrounds that past, the very thing many of these writers are seeking distance from. It is an increasingly common critique of the term "exvangelical" as well. Users argued that defining oneself in opposition to evangelicalism makes it even more difficult to move beyond it and create a new and forward-looking sense of one's own religiosity, Christian or not; some essayists have furthermore critiqued exvangelical communities and discourse for reproducing the kinds of toxic cultures that led them to leave evangelicalism in the first place (see, e.g., Huckabee; Taylor[68]). This dissertation contends that raised-evangelicals use their social media writing to reconfigure their religious identities, a constructive and critical practice; that argument presumes that they are attempting not exclusively to critique and dismantle features of their childhood faith but to also create new and vital ways of being Christian.

I recognize and in fact assert that there is great diversity in the group I gathered for this project, by a number of metrics: while they would all, at the time of data collection, describe themselves as Christian, for some writers that came with an asterisk or a sense of reluctance; the content of their theological beliefs varies widely. And while I would hypothesize that none of them voted for Donald Trump in 2020; I can hypothesize with equal confidence that they have varied views on concerns ranging from public schools, law enforcement, abortion, and LGBTQ inclusion in the church, and would have further disagreements about how to most effectively advance the

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[68] Notably, these pieces often act as disclaimers–both these examples are loosely titled "Why I'm Not an Exvangelical," as if the assumption is that a person with their background and politics would be one; distancing oneself from that label is also an act of resisting a kind of (very online) consensus about religious identity labels.

causes on which they do agree. Much more opinion data would be needed, and from a much wider sample of Christian raised-evangelicals, to determine what beliefs they absolutely share, if any. It was in part for this reason that I chose not to organize my discussion of their social media writing around topics or even specific critiques, with the exception of the January 6th insurrection. Focusing on broader patterns in their values and approaches enabled me to complicate binary, issue-based framings of Christians' political engagement and to sidestep fraught debates about what reforms or revolutions participants might want to see in the evangelical world and how to achieve them. In member-checking, one participant suggested that they might be a few years ahead on their journey away from white evangelicalism from some of the other participants, an indication that they viewed their beliefs and others' as evolving, and recognized a shared trajectory among the writers in this study. Even if participants don't "end up" in the same place, they engage similar questions and make use of similar resources.

However, because of that variation in specific beliefs other scholars might draw the boundaries of the raised-evangelical cohort differently than I do here, and fruitfully so, in order to consider more granularly the specifics dynamics produced by the origins, paths, and decisions of members of that cohort. They might in particular consider those who still call themselves evangelical, those who decidedly do not, those who have joined Mainline denominations, those who reject Christianity, and those who have converted to other faiths. Fruitful projects might consider the specific views and experiences of LGBTQ writers and raised-evangelicals of color, which I include in this dissertation, but which deserve much more robust and focused attention. While the ethnographic approach to which I pivoted does engage many of facets of writers' experiences access through interviews and social media observation, an ethnographic study designed as such might allow greater access to the interplay between participants' on- and off-line lives, including embodied forms of political engagement, and more robustly track how the varied forms of media they

consume–from podcasts to TikToks to books to sermons to YouTube videos to blogs to local news reporting–reappears in their political talk, wherever it takes place.

As highly-pitched news coverage about the disillusionment of young voters and the growing loneliness of Americans of all ages daily underscores, the social fabric of the United States is under strain. American churches, in particular, have not "bounced back" after pandemic lockdowns and controversies; data suggests "modest but measurable" decreases in the percentage of Americans attending church in-person between 2019 and 2022 (Nortey & Rotolo). My call for greater attention to raised-evangelicals and the networks they curate on social media is undergirded by my conviction that as younger Americans loosen their religious affiliations and denominations decline in both membership and in distinctiveness, the cohesion of these networks will have substantial impact on the political engagement of this cohort of more liberal leaning American Christians. The stories of the writers in this dissertation suggest that many who want to retain their faith are looking for connection and belonging in communities that share their values. Whether new religious identities have staying power will depend on how well they can institutionalize–if not in the old way, of denominations and publishing houses, then in some way that offers both the openness and accountability the study participants indicated they want.

The inherent dynamism of networks and a faith rooted in the metaphor of conversation may bring new vitality to American Protestantism. It may also die out quickly. Lessons from other social science fields point to the significant challenge of maintaining loose networks and directing them toward any substantial end. Zeynep Tufekci's work on digital activism suggests that while the internet has facilitated broad participation in social movements, they struggle to maintain focus and cohesion without dedicated leaders to whom participants feel robust connections. Anthropologists like Frederik Barth have suggested that social groups depend, in large part, on the boundaries they uphold; political psychologists find that liberals score high on measures of openness and low on

authoritarianism (e.g., Feldman and Johnson), indicating a resistance to enforced norms which may also limit their capacity to organize around a single message. A more fluid sense of the behavior and beliefs that mark someone as orthodox–as well as a reactive unwillingness to police actions and theologies–may make it increasingly difficult for raised-evangelicals-turned-progressive-Christians to hold together in congregations or to mobilize politically. Progressive religious activism nonetheless has a long and proud history that has been reinvigorated by the "moral shocks" of the Trump years. The literature on these groups, their goals and motivations, resonates with many of the professed values of the participants in this study (see, e.g. Beyerlein and Ryan). Time–and the work of future scholars–will tell if and how raised-evangelicals step into that tradition.

6.7 Looking Forward

At the time of writing, in late 2023 and very early 2024, the behaviors, comments, and analysis addressed in this dissertation feel already historical. We are well into another high-stakes election cycle; new scandals and conflicts shape the news cycle, and the COVID-19 pandemic and protests that marked 2020 have, for most Americans, faded significantly. Elon Musk has bought and dismantled much of what made Twitter a significant forum, and algorithmic changes have likewise reshaped Instagram and Facebook; alternative platforms–Threads, BlueSky, Mastodon, Substack Notes–emerge but none have yet commanded the market. User behavior has changed as well. Anecdotally, I found that many of the people who responded to my survey, including participants, reported decisions to step back from specific platforms or all social networking, sometimes permanently. As a cohort, they exhibit growing concern with how to manage the firehose of available information and ideas with integrity. Curatorial practices framed by engagement and discernment are stressed under an onslaught of information, a rapid news cycle, and an economy driven by attention. A commitment to conversation cannot mean endless engagement online; it

cannot mean living with no settled opinions or ideas. It also cannot mean spending one's life sucked into grief, guilt, and endless cycles of internet discourse about every injustice of which a social media user is made aware.

All the writers cited in this dissertation argue in their own way for more "productive" engagement with social media and offer definitions of productive engagement that forecast who they hope to be as people of faith: disciplined in fostering their own well-being in support of healthy relationships, attentive to the perspectives of marginalized thinkers, committed to truth, accuracy, and dialogue, including and especially through participation in the democratic process. They were and are doing this in a moment when newspaper headlines point to our increasing overwhelm: "The Human Brain Is Just Not Meant to Process This Much Extreme Change'" (Bryan Menegus for *Gizmodo*, published March 2020). "Our Brains Were Not Built for This Much Uncertainty" (Grant and Goldhamer for *Harvard Business Review*, September 2021). "People Aren't Meant to Talk This Much" (Ian Bogost for the Atlantic, October 2021). "We Should All Know Less About Each Other" (Goldberg for the New York Times, November 2021). The idea that things are not as they should be has strong religious resonance, of course, and it may feel self-evident in a world beset by rising nationalism, religious extremism, racism, economic precarity, climate change, and a host of other and more intimate evils. The question we all face is how to live in it, and what kind of future it is possible for us to make together.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Posts and Emails

A.1 Recruitment Email

Hi all,

Do you or people you know identify as having been raised in white evangelicalism? Do you or have you used social media to write back to that community?

I'm recruiting for my dissertation study, which focuses on the rhetorical and ethical decision-making of social media writers addressing the religious communities in which they were raised. I'm particularly interested in interviewing folks born between 1986-1996 who have taken to social media (any platform) in order to

1. Take a position other than the position identified with their religious community of origin,
2. Push back on a position that is identified with their religious community of origin
3. Complicate or raise questions about a position identified with their religious community of origin.

If you'd be willing to take the survey or to share it with friends and acquaintances who fit the bill (or both!) I'd be very grateful. If it's easier to just retweet my call for survey-takers, it's available [here]. And if you're interested in this and want to connect, please email me!

Thank you!

Kathryn Van Zanen
Doctoral Candidate, Joint Program in English and Education
University of Michigan

A.2 Recruitment Social Media Posts

Instagram Post on My Social Media

> Folks born 1986-1996: If you 1. identify yourself as having been raised in white evangelicalism and 2. Have ever used social media to write back to that community, help me with my dissertation? Link in bio for a survey you can take and share with friends, and/or in groups you're a member of. I'd like to hear from a wide range of writers, so send it around!

Twitter Post on My Social Media

Folks b. 1986-96: If you 1. grew up in white #evangelicalism and 2. have ever used social media to write back to that community, help me with my dissertation? Take this survey & share it with friends, &/or in groups you're a member of!

Facebook Post on My Social Media

Many of you know I've been working on a PhD for a few years now, and it's time for my dissertation research to get underway. If you 1. were born between 1986-1996, 2. identify yourself as having been raised in white evangelicalism and 3. Have ever used social media to write back to that community (writing and community both broadly defined), help me graduate by taking and/or sharing this survey with friends and groups? I'd like to hear from a wide range of writers, so send it around! I'm glad to answer questions or chat about this research further.

Instagram or Twitter Direct Message, asking someone to share

Hi, I'm wondering if you'd be willing to share this survey link on your social media. I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan studying the decision-making of folks raised in white evangelicalism who use social media platforms to write back to that community. I'd really appreciate your help recruiting participants for that study! I'd like to hear from a wide range of writers, so I need to get the word out.

Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter Comment

Hi, I'm a PhD candidate at UMich, studying raised-evangelicals' social media writing. If that's you, you were born 1986-1996, and you're willing to take a survey about that, here's the link! I want to hear from a wide range of writers, so please share.

Note: all posts included a direct link to the Qualtrics Survey.

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

Thank you for your interest in this study! Before proceeding to the questions, you will be invited to review information about the study and offer your informed consent for participation in this research study. Please read this materially thoroughly and respond as you are comfortable.

Screener Questions
- First Name
- Last Name
- Email Address
- Do you think of yourself as having been raised (or grown up) in white evangelicalism?
  - Yes
  - No
- Were you born in the years 1986-1996?
  - Yes
  - No

Questions about Religious and Political Identification
Background
- How would you describe the denominational affiliation of the church(es) you grew up in? Select all that apply. *Note: if helpful, refer here to denominational categorizations by the Pew Research Forum.*
  - Baptist
  - Methodist
  - Presbyterian
  - Lutheran
  - Pentecostal
  - Reformed
  - Anabaptist
  - Non-denominational
  - Other, please specify:
- What kind of religious practices did you/r family engage in? Select all that apply.
  - Sunday worship
  - Sunday School
  - Mid-week family programming
  - Youth Group
  - Mission/service trips
  - Vacation Bible School
  - Personal devotions / quiet time
  - Scripture memorization
  - Family devotions

- ○ Christian PreK-12 schooling
- ○ Other, please specify:
- How did your family identify politically when you were growing up? Select all that apply.
  - ○ Libertarian
  - ○ Republican
  - ○ Independent
  - ○ Democrat
  - ○ Socialist
  - ○ Green Party
  - ○ Politically disengaged (e.g., did not vote)
  - ○ Other, please specify:

Present Day
- Do you identify as evangelical now?
  - ○ Yes
  - ○ No
- What is your current religious affiliation (e.g., denomination)?
  - ○ Short answer
- In a sentence or two, how would you describe your religious beliefs and practices now?
  - ○ Short answer
- In a sentence or two, how would you describe your political affiliations and beliefs now?
  - ○ Short answer
- In a sentence or two, what does "white evangelicalism" mean to you?
  - ○ Short answer

Questions about Social Media Writing
- What social media platforms do you use? Select all that apply.
  - ○ Instagram
  - ○ Twitter
  - ○ Facebook
  - ○ Reddit
  - ○ TikTok
  - ○ Other (name)
- *Branching questions based on which platforms respondents select:* What do you use [platform] for? Select all that apply.
  - ○ Professional use
  - ○ Sharing updates
  - ○ Keeping up with friends & family
  - ○ Keeping up with news & public figures
  - ○ Entertainment
  - ○ Inspiration or encouragement
- In the last five years, have you talked about U.S. politics and/or social issues on these platforms, in your own posts, content you share, or in reactions and comments on others' posts?
  - ○ Y/N
- In the last five years, have you talked about evangelicalism and/or Christian faith on these platforms, in your own posts, content you share, or in reactions and comments on others' posts?

- ○ Y/N
- When you're writing posts, sharing content, or commenting on others' posts about politics, religion, or social issues on social media, do you consider evangelical audiences in how you write?
  - ○ Very often
  - ○ Sometimes
  - ○ Rarely
  - ○ Never
- Would you describe any of your social media activity as "writing back" to evangelical community/ies–for example, posts, comments, or shared content that you implicitly or explicitly directed at people you know in those communities, or to evangelicals in general?
  - ○ Y/N
- Why or why not?
  - ○ Short answer

Example Post
- Optional: Using either a publicly accessible link or a screenshot, please share an example of a social media post you have made that fits your definition of "writing back" to an evangelical community.

Demographic Questions
- What year were you born?
  - ○ Drop-down menu
- What is your racial identity?
  - ○ Asian
  - ○ American Indian or Alaska Native
  - ○ Black or African American
  - ○ Multiracial
  - ○ White (non-Hispanic or Latino/a)
  - ○ White (Hispanic or Latino/a)
  - ○ Other: please describe
- What is your gender identity?
  - ○ Cisgender woman
  - ○ Cisgender man
  - ○ Transgender woman
  - ○ Transgender man
  - ○ Non-binary
- What is your sexual orientation?
  - ○ Straight / heterosexual
  - ○ Gay or Lesbian
  - ○ Bi- or pansexual
  - ○ Queer
  - ○ Other, please specify:
- What is your relationship status?
  - ○ Single (never married)
  - ○ In a heterosexual partnership
  - ○ In a non-heterosexual partnership
  - ○ In a heterosexual marriage

- ○ In a non-heterosexual marriage
- ○ Widowed
- ○ Divorced
- ○ Separated
- Do you have children?
    - ○ I do not have children
    - ○ I have 1 or more children (including stepchildren and children for whom you are a primary guardian or caretaker)
- In what region do you currently live?
    - ○ New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont
    - ○ Mideast: Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania
    - ○ Great Lakes: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin
    - ○ Plains: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota
    - ○ Southeast: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia
    - ○ Southwest: Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas
    - ○ Rocky Mountain: Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah and Wyoming
    - ○ Far West: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon and Washington
    - ○ Other, please specify:
- Where did you "grow up"? (Select all that apply).
    - ○ New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont
    - ○ Mideast: Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania
    - ○ Great Lakes: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin
    - ○ Plains: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota
    - ○ Southeast: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia
    - ○ Southwest: Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas
    - ○ Rocky Mountain: Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah and Wyoming
    - ○ Far West: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon and Washington
    - ○ Other, please specify:
- What is your highest level of education? (drop down menu)
    - ○ Some high school (did not graduate)
    - ○ High school
    - ○ Some college (did not graduate)
    - ○ Associates Degree
    - ○ Bachelor's degree
    - ○ Master's Degree
    - ○ Professional degree (e.g., J.D., M.D., D.D.S., M.Div.)
    - ○ Doctorate (Ph.D., Ed.D.)
- What do you currently do for work? (An industry or job title is fine.)
    - ○ Short answer

Closing question

- Is there anything this survey did not ask about that you would like to share?

End of Survey

For respondents whose screener responses indicate that they are not eligible and/or whose IP address indicated that they are outside the US:

> Thank you for your interest in this study! Unfortunately, your answers and/or IP address location indicate that you do not fit the eligibility criteria, which limits respondents by age, religious background, and geographical location. If you have concerns about your ineligibility, you can contact the researcher at vanzanen@umich.edu.

For eligible respondents:

> Thank you for your interest in this study and your thoughtful survey responses.
>
> If you meet the study's eligibility criteria, you may be contacted about setting up a first interview. Those emails will be sent within a few weeks of the close of the survey. Demographic balance will guide the interview requests; please know that your survey response and willingness are deeply appreciated whether or not you're invited to continue with the study.
>
> If you have questions about the study or your participation, you may email me at vanzanen@umich.edu.

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

C.1 First Interview Protocol

Thank you for your thoughtful responses on the survey and for your willingness to talk with me today.

Before we begin:
- Privacy check: is this still a good time and place to talk?
- Confirm receipt of informed consent
- Confirm eligibility
- Confirm pseudonym and pronouns
- Any questions?
- May I have your verbal consent to record?

General Questions
1. Tell me again about your religious and political background, and then how you identify today.
   a. How would you describe the church(es) you grew up in?
   b. How would you describe your family's religious practices during your childhood?
   c. What do you remember about the political background of your childhood?
   d. How would you describe your religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices now?
      i. Are you attending church? If so, how often?
      ii. How would you describe your church?
   e. How would you describe your political affiliations and beliefs now?
   f. How would you describe the change from your religious affiliation in your childhood to your religious affiliations now?
      i. What was the catalyst for that change?
   g. Can you tell me a little bit about the religious media you consume (podcasts, books, television, etc.)?
2. Tell me about your experiences of social media and evangelical communities.
   a. Are you connected with many evangelicals on social media?
      i. On which social media platforms?
   b. How do you engage with people from that community on [named platform]?
      i. Is that engagement similar or different on [other named platform used by participant]?
   c. When and why do you choose to respond to posts from evangelical social media connections?
      i. What prompts you to respond (including events and personal connections, etc.)?
      ii. How do you respond (for example: reactions, comments, direct messages)?
      iii. When and why do you choose not to respond?

      d. When and why do you choose to create your own posts, including sharing content, that engage your evangelical social media connections?
           i.   When and why do you choose not to?
      e. What choices do you make around privacy settings–e.g., limiting a post to "close friends" lists–when writing or sharing content about politics and social issues?

Writing sample: Let's talk specifically about the social media post you shared with me.
3. How is this post similar or different to your other social media activity?
4. How would you describe what you were doing with this post?
5. Tell me about your thinking when you were deciding to write this post.
    a. What prompted you to write this post?
    b. Why did you decide to write about this topic?
    c. What was your hope or goal in writing this post?
6. Who were you imagining your readers to be when you wrote this?
    a. Were you concerned about the reactions you might receive? Whose?
    b. What responses did you receive? Were you surprised by who responded, or by what they said?
    c. What factors did you consider when you were deciding whether and how to engage their responses?
7. How did writing this post impact you?
    ● How did writing this post impact your thinking about your religious affiliations?
    ● How did writing this post impact your desire to write back to your community of origin?

Social Media Activity in General:
1. Have you continued to write back since you wrote the post we just discussed? Why or why not?
2. Have you changed your approach to writing back since you wrote that post? Why or why not?
3. In what other ways have you written back to white evangelicals or white evangelicalism on social media–for example, through comments, reactions, private messages, etc.?

After the interview:
● Thank you for your time.
● Your compensation for this interview will be mailed to your home. This process may take a few weeks.
    ○ Would you prefer a check or gift card?
    ○ Can you confirm the appropriate address?

C.2 Second Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time for this follow-up interview. As you know, I have had access to your social media feeds for the past few weeks, and I'd like to talk about some of the writing you've done on social media. We'll talk about 1-3 posts, depending on time.

Before we begin:
- Privacy check: is this still a good time and place to talk?
- Confirm pseudonym and pronouns
- Any questions?
- May I have your verbal consent to record?

Writing sample 1: Let's talk specifically about [post identified through social media observation.]
1. How is this post similar or different to your other social media activity?
2. How would you describe what you were doing with this post?
3. Tell me about your thinking when you were deciding to write this post.
    a. What prompted you to write this post?
    b. Why did you decide to write about this topic?
    c. What was your hope or goal in writing this post?
4. Who were you imagining your readers to be when you wrote this?
    a. Were you concerned about the reactions you might receive? Whose?
    b. Who responded to it? Were you surprised?
    c. What factors did you consider when you were deciding whether and how to engage their responses?
5. How did writing this post impact you?
    a. How did writing this post impact your thinking about your religious affiliations?
    b. How did writing this post impact your desire to write back to your community of origin?

Writing sample 2: Let's talk specifically about [post identified through social media observation.]
1. How is this post similar or different to your other social media activity?
2. How would you describe what you were doing with this post?
3. Tell me about your thinking when you were deciding to write this post.
    a. What prompted you to write this post?
    b. Why did you decide to write about this topic?
    c. What was your hope or goal in writing this post?
4. Who were you imagining your readers to be when you wrote this?
    a. Were you concerned about the reactions you might receive? Whose?
    b. Who responded to it? Were you surprised?
    c. What factors did you consider when you were deciding whether and how to engage their responses?
5. How did writing this post impact you?
    a. How did writing this post impact your thinking about your religious affiliations?
    b. How did writing this post impact your desire to write back to your community of origin?

Concluding questions:
1. Have you continued to write back to evangelicals or evangelicalism since these posts, including commenting and resharing content?
    a. How?
    b. Why or why not?
2. Did our conversation raise any questions or thoughts you'd like to share?

After the interview:

- Thank you for your time.
- Your compensation for this interview will be mailed to your home. This process may take a few weeks.
    - Would you prefer a check or gift card?
    - Can you confirm the appropriate address?

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