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IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF THE WORLD:
DISIDENTIFICATION AND THE EVANGELICAL RIGHT

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ABSTRACT

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José Esteban Muñoz used the term *disidentification* to describe the way queer people of color strategically engage with mainstream culture without either assimilating to it or rejecting it altogether. This paper uses Muñoz's theory, in conjunction with the work of historians of evangelicalism and theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to demonstrate how the Evangelical Right is able to engage with the theological call to be "in the world, but not of the world" by perceiving itself as a marginalized subculture. The Evangelical Right developed in the late 1970s as evangelicals in the United States began to shift from a philosophy of fundamentalist separatism towards explicitly political activism by disidentifying with mainstream culture, working to engage with it and reform it for their own purposes. In making the parallels between Muñoz's disidentification and evangelical history explicit, this paper argues that the methodological tools of queer theory offer a new frame for understanding the emergence of the Evangelical Right.

To all the wallflowers who dared to make space for ourselves at the table.

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

When Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in 1980, he did so with the support of an emergent coalition of conservative evangelicals, led by politically savvy preachers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. As a movement that had otherwise attracted minimal attention from mainstream journalists and political pundits in years past, the Evangelical Right was quickly on everyone's mind and pen following the 1980 election. Frances FitzGerald observes that while this initial interest slowed by the mid-80s, it returned every few years, eventually solidifying into a pattern of waxing and waning journalistic attention.[1] In the wake of presidential elections and scandals, observers would speculate about who exactly these politically-minded evangelicals were, what their intentions were, and how they came to be.

Political observers were not the only ones to notice the increasing influence of the evangelical-Republican coalition in public life; the 1980s also saw a burgeoning interest in the history of evangelicalism itself, both from within and outside of the movement. In what Isaac B. Sharp has called a "new era of evangelical historiography on evangelicalism," evangelical historians like Mark Noll and George Marsden began looking to the past in order to frame the story of evangelicalism as a long-standing North American Protestant tradition.[2] By placing American evangelicalism in its historical

[1] Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 1.

[2] Isaac B. Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians − and the Movement That Pushed Them Out* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 8.

context, these scholars demonstrated - explicitly or implicitly - how the social movement of conservative evangelicalism in the 1980s was both similar and dissimilar to earlier iterations of the tradition. This history also revealed an ongoing tension throughout North American history between evangelical piety and political engagement with the larger social world. As it turns out, the efforts of conservative evangelical leaders in 1980 to influence society with their evangelicalism was not a new phenomenon; what was new, however, were the tools and methods by which they attempted to do so.

The maturation of this field of evangelical historiography over four decades, paired with pollsters like Barna and Gallup explicitly tracking evangelical patterns of belief and civic engagement, set the stage for another explosion of interest in evangelicals and politics following the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Though many evangelical leaders expressed concern over Trump's candidacy leading up to the election, evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike were forced to reckon with the polls reporting that 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump. In the years since, there has been a plethora of journalistic and academic inquiries asking how and why white evangelicals would rally behind a candidate that, by most metrics, represents very little of the theological or behavioral distinctives of evangelicalism. Many scholars, including FitzGerald, Randall Balmer, Kristin Kobes du Mez, and even Marsden and Noll, have returned to the Reagan era and earlier to explicate how exactly this Evangelical Right functions as a social movement, rather than simply a religious tradition.

While the newfound attention on evangelical historiography provides helpful context for understanding the Evangelical Right as a socio-political movement - in what is possibly a second generation in the vein of Marsden and Noll's early work, a *new* new

era of evangelical historiography - it leaves some essential questions underexplored. Though scholars like FitzGerald and Sharp have expertly explained how "evangelical" can be simultaneously an *individual* religious identity and a *social* political identity, questions of how that identity is constructed have been largely implicit or ignored. The canon of evangelical history has offered little to explain how individuals construct their religious identity at sites of conflict between private belief and public belonging; a more explicit treatment of this public/private tension as a site for the construction of an evangelical identity may be in order.

A fundamental tension throughout evangelical history has been one of separatism and activism; from the Second Great Awakening to the fundamentalist-modernist debate on trial in 1925 to the Billy Graham crusades, evangelical Protestants have long wrestled with their call to be in the world, but not of it. Does being "not of the world" mandate isolationist policies, justifying the creation of separate evangelical institutions in education and media that offer no cross-contamination with their secular counterparts? Or does the injunction to "be in the world" warrant an activist stance, pushing for evangelical representation in political office and social institutions in order to reform society through evangelical values?

This tension to be "in-but-not-of" has long been present in North American evangelicalism, but it took on a new political urgency in the wake of the 1980s coalition between evangelical leaders and partisan Republican politics. With Jerry Falwell's proclamation that his Moral Majority helped win the election for Ronald Reagan (whether or not this was true), it seemed clear that this iteration of evangelicalism had

settled on an activist position, and that their activism had secured them with sizable influence on the political landscape of the nation.[3]

The paradox, however, lies in these largely white, Republican-voting evangelicals' sense of identity. Despite the fact that, as a social group, conservative white evangelicals have continued to participate in electoral politics and, at least in 1980 and 2016, have seemed to have significant influence on their outcome, those who find themselves within the Evangelical Right consistently view themselves as an embattled minority. In fact, self-conception as an oppressed subculture is the primary fuel for the evangelical impulse towards civic engagement. FitzGerald and Williams tell the story of the post-1980s Evangelical Right as one of waning social influence, not least because it has failed to produce a new generation of leaders as influential as Falwell, Robertson, and James Dobson, and because evangelicals "no longer followed their leaders."[4] However, as Gushee and Sharp write, while the movement continues to weaken culturally, "ironically a sense of cultural embattlement is contributing to a stronger grip of that often-reactionary spirit, at least in much of mainstream evangelicalism"; the loss of a generation of politically-ambitious leaders has not lessened the movements' conviction for political reformation.[5] Gushee and Sharp continue to write that what non-evangelicals

[3] FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 31; Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 193. Whether the evangelical vote really did decide the 1980 election has been extensively debated, but it is noteworthy that Falwell and his peers would want to take credit for the victory. Williams argues that Reagan's campaign resonated with conservative voters beyond the evangelical bloc alone, and that many voters were unsatisfied with Carter; still, the 1980 election is significant for solidifying the association between evangelicals and Republican politics. The movement has been undeniably partisan ever since.

[4] FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 635.

[5] David P. Gushee and Isaac B. Sharp, *Evangelical Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), xxvi.

view as "preserving space for faith-based discrimination," the Evangelical Right views as "preserving religious liberty for evangelicals in a hostile culture."[6] How can it be that the Evangelical Right continues to see itself as a minority group within a hostile mainstream, when many of the dominant logics of mainstream culture - namely, white, male, heteronormative hegemony - are also the underlying logics of the Evangelical Right itself?

This paradox is implicit in much of the new literature on evangelicalism's history, but little has foregrounded this question of identity negotiation and majority/minority positionality within the Evangelical Right. To understand this tension, we must look not at the 1980 presidential victory, but the shift in evangelical political attitudes that took place in the years prior. Reagan's election was proof that an Evangelical Right had settled into an attitude of activism and reformation and rejected earlier strategies of isolation and separatism. The late 1970s, particularly during Jimmy Carter's campaign and presidency from 1976-1979, offer a better window to analyze how this shift happened. It is significant that these years come on the heels of the so-called Long Sixties, an era that saw similar tensions of identity construction and subcultural political engagement among various minority rights-bearing groups. What's missing from conventional evangelical historiography, then, is the use of the Evangelical Right's self-conception as a minority social group as the key analytical frame.

In this paper, I suggest that the concept of *disidentification* - which refers to the strategic way some minority groups relate to mainstream culture - helps explain how the Evangelical Right developed as a socio-political movement by adopting the political

[6] Gushee and Sharp, *Evangelical Ethics*, xxvi.

strategies of minorities in the civil rights and gay liberation movements. This frame explicitly explores the construction of "evangelical" as a minority identity through parallels with the identity formation of other minority groups. I use the work of two scholars of queer theory to develop a theoretical framework to understand the Evangelical Right's use of these political tools, how the movement navigates the tension of private religious identity and public political identity, and how their imperfect appropriation of these tools creates a paradox wherein their sense of marginalization persists simultaneously with their increased political influence.

My first interlocutor from the field of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, has a now-classic formulation of how the Western social order is organized through unstable binaries, and her theory of universalizing and minoritizing views offers a way to understand the tension in the Evangelical Right's paradox of identity.[7] The second, José Esteban Muñoz, offers disidentification as a way of naming how minority subjects perform politics and construct identity in relation to dominant ideologies.[8]

By using the work of these two scholars to offer a new kind of analysis on the history of the Evangelical Right in the late 1970s, I am undertaking an ambitious task in two important ways. First, I am using Sedgwick's and Muñoz's theory in ways that are considerably distanced from their original contexts and purposes. Sedgwick's early work - including *Epistemology of the Closet,* the text I examine in Chapter 3 - is primarily grounded in literature studies; Muñoz, on the other hand, frames his first book

[7] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[8] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Disidentifications within the field of media and performance studies. Neither Sedgwick nor Muñoz attempted to apply their critique specifically to the phenomenon of evangelical politics in the U.S., and I am under no pretense that they would sanctify my use of their work as such.[9]

Despite this, the second reason this is an ambitious task is also why I have chosen to use their work in this way, acknowledging that I am taking it in a direction it was perhaps not intended to go. Queer theory - and critical social theory of all kinds - has come to function as a sort of a boogeyman for the Evangelical Right in the twenty-first century, and stands in for all that evangelical activism has come to oppose in the last century: gay liberation, civil rights, secularization, Marxist social critique, poststructuralism, and so on. In fact, opposition to gender, sexual, and racial minority-rights movements was one of the major catalysts of white evangelicals' own political mobilization. This paper attempts to show, however, that white evangelicals' political strategies are co-opted strategies employed first by Black civil rights activists and queer communities of color; this is a chapter in the story of the Evangelical Right that goes largely unmentioned. By choosing to use the tools of queer theory as my method for analyzing the paradox of Evangelical Right identity construction, I am further destabilizing that movement's claim to normativity, self-evidence, and universality, showing that their political strategies over the past 50 years have direct parallels with the very social movements that the Evangelical Right emerged in opposition to.

[9] That said, there are continued connections between Sedgwick and Muñoz's later work and religious studies as well. In work such as *Touching Feeling* and *Tendencies,* Sedgwick takes a turn toward the affectual, which has rich potential for spiritual, if not religious, analysis. Muñoz, for his part, offers a politics of queerness in *Cruising Utopia* as "not yet here" that could anticipate a comparison to the "now, but not yet" theology of the Kingdom of God found in Luke-Acts.

With these limitations and goals in mind, I employ Sedgwick and Muñoz to demonstrate not simply how the Evangelical Right emerged at a specific place and time, but how its emergence was enabled by the appropriation of political methods employed by minoritarian subjects to speak truth to power. Therein lies the paradox: the Evangelical Right perpetuates itself by positioning white evangelical identity as a minority subjectivity, employing disidentificatory practices to transfigure the mainstream for their own inclusion, as communities of queers and people of color have done for decades, but because in actuality the Evangelical Right is firmly embedded *within* white hegemonic normativity, they *mis*appropriate the practice of disidentification and end up reinforcing – rather than dismantling or unsettling – the power of dominant ideologies.

To demonstrate this, Chapter 2 first defines the historical frame of the paper's analysis. It does this by defining the Evangelical Right and delineating how the movement differs from American evangelicalism or religious conservatism more broadly. Then, it offers a brief history of the evangelical tension between separatism and activism throughout the twentieth century, noting the ongoing call to be in the world, but not of it. Finally, it analyzes the Evangelical Right's shift towards political engagement in the late 1970s, and how this shift offered a site for the construction of "evangelical" as a minority identity.

Chapter 3 explores in more depth the theoretical tools of Sedgwick and Muñoz as they relate to the tension of minority/majority identity. It explains how Muñoz's strategy of disidentification is relevant to the Evangelical Right's relationship to politics and mainstream culture, and the limits to their use of that strategy.

Chapter 4 offers a few examples of how the Evangelical Right has practiced the strategy of disidentification, finding ways to be "in the world, but not of the world" through political organizing, mass media, and consumer culture.

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with suggestions on how the analysis in this work may lead to further explorations, highlighting the rich potential of applying queer methodologies to evangelical historiography.

CHAPTER 2.

A GENEALOGY OF THE EVANGELICAL RIGHT

The Evangelical Right is a particular socio-political movement embedded within the larger religious landscape of conservative American Protestantism. This movement - which mobilized its members through organizations like Falwell's Moral Majority and Robertson's Christian Coalition - has commonly been called the Religious Right or the Christian Right. This chapter focuses on the development of this movement throughout the twentieth century and its strategies for political engagement; because I am specifically interested in how religious identity impacts those political strategies, I use the more specific term Evangelical Right in order to focus on "evangelical" as an identity.[1] In this framing, I am intentionally leaving out two demographics that may otherwise be implicated in a study of politics in American Christianity.

First, I am excluding moderate, liberal, or progressive Protestants who consider themselves religiously evangelical but do not align with the conservative politics of the Evangelical Right. As a combination of both a religious term and a political one, not all

[1] Randall Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021); Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019); Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017); Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). The boundaries and histories of social movements are concepts that must be defended; the term a scholar chooses to use reflects the kind of analysis they are hoping to do. Williams uses the term Christian Right in his work and specifically draws attention to the coalition-building between Catholics and Protestants in the formation of a religious Republican base. Positioning the same movement within a larger history of waxing and waning fundamentalism, Mark Noll calls the movement the *New* Christian Right. FitzGerald tracks the same history and yet remains focused on "The Evangelicals." Alternatively, Randall Balmer explicitly uses the term Religious Right because calling it the Christian Right (new or otherwise) would, in his view, potentially legitimize ultra-conservative evangelicals' claim to authentic Christianity. I mention a few conflicting examples to demonstrate the discursive power of naming a movement that so often defies definition.

evangelicals are implicated in the Evangelical Right. It is also important to note that I am focusing on a movement specific to the United States, which excludes millions of evangelicals worldwide whose politics may or may not reflect those of Falwell and Robertson's coalition. Though "evangelical" has come to be used colloquially to mean "part of the conservative Christian political movement in the U.S," there have also been progressive and liberal evangelical voices insisting that evangelical and Evangelical Right are not synonymous.[2]

Secondly, I am excluding religious non-evangelicals who have also been part of the Religious Right. Coalition-building across denominational lines - and shared moral concerns between conservative Protestants and Catholics in particular - was a key feature of this movement's emergence; calling it the Religious Right or the Christian Right, then, necessarily implicates Catholics who were also involved in conservative political and moral activism during this period.[3] Focusing specifically on the history of political engagement among conservative Christians, however, requires treating Catholics and Protestants separately, as they have different histories of social engagement. When conservative evangelicals took a turn toward social reform and political activism in the 1970s, they broke from a 50-year pattern of isolation and fundamentalism; Catholics, on the other hand, have long had a tradition of social reform and engagement. For these reasons, I use the term Evangelical Right as a way to specifically analyze the efforts of conservative evangelical Protestants to navigate the tension of being in-but-not-of the

[2] Though they have been far less politically influential than the Evangelical Right, some have called these progressive and liberal voices an Evangelical Left, led by figures like Ron Sider, Jim Wallis, and Lisa Sharon Harper.

[3] Noll, *History of Christianity,* 410-14.

world, recognizing that the whole of the political movement itself does not include *all* evangelicals nor *only* evangelicals.

Individuals who I characterize as part of the Evangelical Right may not always self-identify with such a term; many call themselves simply evangelical, or even just Christian. Still, there is an essential characteristic that binds them together: *not* theological distinctives - as in David Bebbington's quadrilateral formula for defining evangelicalism - but a particular form of and impetus for political engagement.[4] That white conservative evangelical Christians predominantly vote Republican in elections, protest what they see as immoral legislation and social practices, and advocate for their political principles in the public square seems self-evident in the landscape of twenty-first century U.S. politics, but this has not always been the case.

Christ and Culture: Wrestling with "In-But-Not-Of" from 1925-1975

The Evangelical Right emerged to answer a question that Christians had been asking for centuries: how should one live in allegiance to one's religious community and beliefs, however countercultural they may be, while navigating the institutions and influences of secular society? The leaders of the Evangelical Right answered that question through political efforts to Christianize America, but theirs has not been the only answer given, even by evangelicals in the U.S.

[4] David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–17. Bebbington's quadrilateral names four shared defining characteristics of evangelicalism: *conversionism*, *activism*, *biblicism*, and *crucicentrism* (a focus on the theology of Christ and the cross).

As the now-conventional telling of evangelical history goes, evangelicals regularly engaged in political and social reformation projects prior to the 1920s, with the Scopes trial being a symbol for the loss of influence fundamentalists held over mainstream culture, forcing them to retreat into a separatist position.[5] The modernists in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy continued to engage with mainstream culture, but as the construction of evangelical as a religious identity continued to narrow throughout the twentieth century, modernists could not seriously be considered to be evangelical, whether or not they would have claimed such a label for themselves. Following the 1920s, "evangelical" became an identity for those who rejected culture and focused inwardly on forming their own institutions and saving souls.[6] Though a century later it appears self-evident that modernists or culturally-engaged Christians would never have been considered evangelical, Sharp argues that this was not always the case, nor an inevitable outcome, but rather the result of deliberate efforts to clarify and narrow the meaning of evangelical identity.[7]

From the 1920s to the 1970s, evangelicals navigated cultural engagement through a politics of separatism, focusing on building and establishing their own institutions, publishing houses, and organizations. The goal of these institutions was not to assert a spiritual influence over society, but rather to provide a safe haven for individuals to

[5] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 149-76. Noll argues that the significance of the Scopes trial in evangelical history has been overstated, but that the death of William Jennings Bryan makes the year 1925 work as a historical marker for the turn to isolationist fundamentalism regardless.

[6] Isaac B. Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians − and the Movement That Pushed Them Out* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 34-36.

[7] Sharp, 34-36.

protect their private religious identities from the modernizing and corrupting influences of the mainstream. Balmer has noted that the formation of these institutions for separatist purposes later proved useful as their matured forms took on activist impulses in the 1970s, but it is important to note that reforming society was not the original intent.[8]

During this period, evangelicals may have preached about public moral decline, but they did not always respond through active political and civic engagement. Debates over how exactly to be in-but-not-of the world were especially salient in the postwar period of the 1950s and 60s, but there was not yet a consensus that political activism was the correct answer; if anything, the massive proliferation of voluntary religious societies and denominational splits during this period demonstrate the lack of consensus that characterized evangelicals' political opinions by 1980.[9]

Evangelicals in the postwar period took seriously the biblical call to be "in the world, but not of it," but debated over what level of cultural and civic engagement such a command mandated. In 1951 H. Richard Niebuhr published *Christ and Culture*, in which he set out to describe various ways that Christians have engaged culture throughout history.[10]

For Niebuhr, the "Christ" in Christ and culture represents not just the figure of Jesus Christ himself, but the Christian as a member of a community of believers across

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[8] Balmer, *Bad Faith*, chap. 3**.** Balmer writes that the very seeds planted for separatist purposes in the 20s-40s came to be very helpful in the political project of the late 70s-80s.

[9] Noll, *History of Christianity*, 399-405.

[10] Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals*, 63-64. Sharp argues that mid-century neo-orthodox theologians like Niebuhr and Karl Barth are not exactly evangelical, despite having some shared theological commitments with evangelicalism, but were among those who were too theologically liberal to be included in the ever-narrowing construction of evangelical identity. Nevertheless, Niebuhr's insights in *Christ and Culture* demonstrate an ongoing concern among Protestants in the mid-twentieth century with the proper way to be "in the world but not of the world."

time and space.[11] Prioritizing Christ, in Niebuhr's formulations, means submitting to the laws of God as understood through Scripture and the historic Christian tradition. Culture, on the other hand, is the world of human social life, with its own laws, norms, and customs. Niebuhr describes culture as "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values" that humanity "superimposes on the natural."[12] Importantly, he also notes that this definition of culture is synonymous with the New Testament use of "the world" as shorthand for the domain of human culture.

With these two domains in mind, Niebuhr suggests five typologies of Christian answers to the question: how should Christ-followers engage with culture? At one extreme, there are the separatists ("Christ against culture") who oppose all cultural influence and claim allegiance only to the laws of God. At the other extreme, cultural accommodationists ("Christ of culture") view Christ as the fulfillment of the best that human culture has to offer. In between these two poles are three other ways that Christians have tried to reconcile allegiance to Christ and engagement with culture: a synthesis of cultural and spiritual wisdom ("Christ above culture"), a dualism that acknowledges both spheres of influence while keeping them distinct ("Christ and culture in paradox"), and an evangelistic mission to shape culture through the influence of Christ ("Christ the transformer of culture"). Niebuhr readily acknowledges that creating a taxonomy of Christian strategies for cultural engagement necessarily simplifies the matter, minimizing the ways that various theological schools of thought have

[11] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 11.

[12] Niebuhr, 32.

incorporated multiple of these strategies (and others). Nevertheless, these typologies have been influential in shaping the conversation about Christian engagement with culture ever since. For the current project, they also help demonstrate mid-century thinking about the opposite poles of separatism and cultural engagement, decades prior to the emergence of the Evangelical Right.

In the post-war period, the so-called neo-evangelicals began organizing into institutions that would come to serve as the bedrock of socially engaged evangelicalism. Trying to establish a middle ground between fundamentalist isolationism (Christ against culture) and cultural assimilation (Christ of culture), these neo-evangelicals sought to be in-but-not-of the world by striking out ground between these two poles. In a strategy echoing Niebuhr's conversionist paradigm (Christ the transformer of culture), they began establishing their own media, educational institutions, and professional networks. From the 1940s to the 1960s, institutions like *Christianity Today,* the National Association of Evangelicals, and Fuller Theological Seminary allowed evangelicals ways to be more engaged in culture while still having theologically safe centers under which to gather, what Christian Smith calls "sacred umbrellas."[13] The neo-evangelicals of this period, however, were largely not engaged in explicitly political activism. Billy Graham was certainly not apolitical; in fact, he had regular invitations to the White House and built relationships with presidents across several administrations.[14] However, he didn't urge evangelicals to become involved with politics through voter registration, direct mail

[13] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 106.

[14] Williams, *God's Own Party,* 21-31.

campaigning, and single-issue lobbying in the way Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell came to be known for later. The neo-evangelicals may have been staking out a strategy of "Christ the transformer of culture" but had not yet reached consensus on how that approach should impact the political sphere - or if Christians even should be involved in the political sphere. It wasn't until the rise of the Evangelical Right, as a combination of top-down political movements orchestrated by a small number of operatives/strategists, grassroots mobilization of ecumenical coalitions around key moral-political issues, and a felt sense of marginalization, that a high level of political engagement became ubiquitous in U.S. conservative Protestantism.

From Isolation to Activism, 1976-1979

In the late 1970s, as the Evangelical Right began to solidify into an active, influential political movement, evangelicals began to adopt a new, definitive way of engaging with culture, and their institutions took on new priorities that focused outward. This shift was in many ways a response to the social upheaval of the Long Sixties, but it was a delayed response.[15] During the civil rights era of the mid-1960s, conservative evangelicals were engaged in their own publishing, education, and media enterprises, but still did not regard political activism as a necessary stance for evangelical piety. Conservative evangelicals certainly voiced opposition to the efforts of civil rights activists and gay liberation activists, but intentional, organized political mobilization against such movements didn't become the de facto solution until a decade later.

[15] FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 235.

Jerry Falwell, the figurehead of the Evangelical Right if one singular figure can be named as such, exemplifies this drastic shift from isolationist beliefs to political activism. On March 21, 1965, Falwell delivered a sermon at his Thomas Road Baptist Church titled "Ministers and Marches" in which he fervently argued that Christians are not called to change the world through political activism - which he calls change from the outside - but by changing individual hearts from the inside. He chastises Christians who were marching, protesting, and lobbying for civil rights legislation, insisting that "love cannot be legislated."[16]

Over the next 15 years, Falwell's tone shifted. In 1979 he founded the Moral Majority, which had as its express purpose political lobbying, registering conservative voters, and educating the public about legislation that would advance Christian morality. In 1980, he published the intensely polemical *Listen, America!*, a manifesto that urged Christians to be politically active in order to exert Christian influence on the nation and bring it back to a former but lost public piety. In this book, he clearly advances a "Christ the transformer of culture" strategy that heavily involves political activism:

> Christians must keep America great by being willing to go into the halls of Congress, by getting laws passed that will protect the freedom and liberty of her citizens. The Moral Majority, Inc., was formed to acquaint Americans everywhere with the tragic decline in our nation's morals and to provide leadership in establishing an effective coalition of morally active citizens who are (a) prolife, (b) profamily, (c) promoral, and (d) pro-American. If the vast majority of Americans (84 per cent, according to George Gallup) still believe the Ten Commandments are valid today, why are we permitting a few leading amoral humanists and naturalists to take over the most influential positions in this nation?[17]

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[16] Jerry Falwell, "Ministers and Marches" (sermon, Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA, March 21, 1965), 16.

[17] Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 227.

Perhaps love cannot be legislated, but clearly by 1980 Falwell believed a myriad of evangelical concerns over public morality could be. At a press conference in October 1980, following the founding of the Moral Majority and the publishing of *Listen, America!*, Falwell called his own 1965 sermon "false prophecy".[18] He had made a complete turn in his promotion of isolationism and damnation of Christians engaging in political protest; claiming to now adopt the same strategy as Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Christians in the civil rights movement, he even "vowed to undertake civil disobedience if the Equal Rights Amendment was passed and Congress voted to draft women into the armed forces."[19]

If Falwell's own change in political philosophy is any indication of the Evangelical Right as a whole, then what happened between 1965 and 1980 that seemingly permanently changed the methods by which evangelicals negotiated Christ and culture in a distinctly political way? As a social movement, the emergence of the Evangelical Right was primed by longstanding tensions within evangelicalism to be in-but-not-of the world. Following the social and political revolutions of the Long Sixties, the architects of the movement exploited these tensions to mobilize evangelicals across the country in support of politically conservative agendas as a way of being more actively in-the-world. The precise catalyst that transformed seeds of unrest into a fully formed political movement, however, is contested within evangelical historiography. Some scholars, like Kristin Kobes du Mez, argue that issues of gender, sexuality, and

[18] FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals*, 286-87.

[19] FitzGerald, 286-87.

reproductive rights were at the heart of this political galvanization.[20] Others, like Randall Balmer, argue that opposition to racial integration was the catalyst, while consensus on issues like abortion came later.[21] It's likely a bit of both, but the deeper philosophy behind the anti-abortion cause, anti-integration debates, and the many campaigns for religious liberty that followed lies in the tension between isolation and social reformation. With the IRS rulings against tax-exemption for segregated private schools (Balmer's version of the origin story), the last bastion of truly separatist, isolated evangelical institutions was shattered, and its constituents had no choice but to engage with culture, tipping the scale permanently towards political involvement. As evangelical activists later joined forces with Catholics to take up the anti-abortion cause, they were acting out of a newly solidified conviction that evangelical Christians must seek to wield political influence in order to save the soul of the nation.

When *NEWSWEEK* declared 1976 as the "year of the evangelical," a movement that had once been seen as fringe in the American social landscape began to attract outsized attention from historians, scholars, political pundits, and journalists. A generation of new evangelical historiography sought to trace the origins of the contemporary movement by locating its antecedents in 18th and 19th century evangelical Protestantism and attempting to identify the features that made one an evangelical in the

[20] Kristin Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

[21] Balmer, *Bad Faith*, chap. 6. Balmer identifies the primary catalyst that brought the evangelical-Republican coalition together as the late 1970s IRS rulings that revoked the tax-exempt status of private religious schools that refused to integrate, such as Bob Jones University. According to Balmer, racial anxieties mobilized evangelicals to the support of BJU and similar institutions and deepened their animosity towards Carter's presidency and Democrats in general.

late twentieth century context.[22] This wave of evangelical history, primarily written by insiders seeking to explain and define their own tradition, was bolstered by a new wave of pollsters that tracked religious beliefs, attitudes, and identities in the late 70s and 80s that made it possible for journalists and academics to analyze the apparently massively-influential movement of evangelicalism.[23]

Evangelical as Identity

As Isaac Sharp argues, however, the story of twentieth-century evangelicalism is not one that can be told through theological, political, or behavioral definitions. What Barna and Gallup tried to understand through quantitative data, Marsden and Noll through historical analysis, and Bebbington through theological distinctives all failed to capture a consensus on what exactly made an evangelical.[24] By the time evangelicalism had earned serious intellectual consideration as a significant site of social analysis for these thinkers, the term had already become too unwieldy and amorphous to be decidedly helpful.

What Sharp suggests, however, and which helps define the scope of the Evangelical Right in the argument that follows, is that from within the tradition of twentieth century evangelicalism there emerged a religious identity of some particular evangelicals (whom Sharp calls "capital-E Evangelical") that came to be defined not by theological belief or denominational affiliation, but by an ongoing effort from evangelical

[22] Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals,* 8-9.

[23] Sharp, 2-4.

[24] Sharp, 12-13.

leaders to continually decree who wasn't truly an insider. Over the course of the last few decades of the twentieth century, this ongoing task of boundary maintenance helped solidify "evangelical" as a very specific socio–politico-religious identity that "has become a proprietary trademark reserved almost exclusively for its most fundamentalistic, theologically and politically conservative, white, straight, and male-headship-affirming claimants."[25] Evangelical, in its post-war iteration, was an intentionally broad and cross-denominational signifier; it worked to shrink the influence of denominational and theological ties in favor of a broadly palatable "born-again Christianity." Billy Graham is the primary protagonist for propagating this brand of evangelicalism. However, because the umbrella was broad and inclusive, controversies of boundary maintenance forced evangelical leaders to further define the identity as something specific, manageable, and recognizable, because it was important to define "evangelical" as a subcultural identity, distinguishable from the mainstream. In other words, this identity was constructed and invented through recurrent, deliberate attempts at distinguishing insiders from outsiders.

The concept of "evangelical" as a collective subcultural identity requires a bit more explanation. The Evangelical Right has been regularly analyzed by scholars of religion as a particular manifestation of conservative American religion and by historians and political scientists as an experiment in conservative activism, but the language of identity requires analysis from sociologists and philosophers. In the next chapter, Muñoz and Sedgwick will guide the way towards a philosophical explanation; for a sociological

[25] Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals,* 32.

consideration, however, I first turn to Christian Smith's in-depth study of American evangelicals from 1998.

In this study, Smith develops a theory of how "evangelical" operates as an identity; he offers this in order to explain why American evangelicalism as a tradition appears to be thriving in a world it perceives to be continually hostile. Measured by six self-reported factors, Smith found that evangelicals consistently demonstrated higher levels of religious strength than fundamentalists, mainline Protestants, and liberal Protestants (using survey respondents' own self-defining religious affiliation). These factors were 1) Adherence to beliefs; 2) salience of faith; 3) robustness of faith; 4) group participation; 5) commitment to mission; and 6) membership retention and recruitment.[26] Positioning the study against secularization theory, which argues that religious strength declines in modern, pluralistic contexts, Smith's book attempts to develop a theory to explain why American evangelicalism continues to display such high levels of religious vitality, even more so than any other Protestant tradition.

To explain this phenomenon, Smith offers a "subcultural identity theory of religious vitality," arguing that rather than being weakened by pluralism, American evangelicalism is strong precisely because it is one subculture that must distinguish itself from a myriad of religious and nonreligious Others.[27] Smith expertly traces how in-group identity is both formed and strengthened, and argues that evangelicals have a strong sense of religious identity because they are able to relate to the dominant culture with an attitude of "distinction-with-engagement." This subcultural identity theory of religious

[26] Smith, *American Evangelicalism,* 21.

[27] Smith, 90-119.

vitality has two parts: one to account for a subcultural religion's *persistence* and one to account for its *strength*. To explain the *persistence* of evangelical religiosity, Smith writes that "Religion survives and can thrive in pluralistic, modern society by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging."[28] This subcultural persistence is in contrast to fundamentalism, which takes an isolationist stance; isolation from mainstream society creates a strong in-group distinction, but does not provide engagement with culture that helps a subculture survive in a pluralistic context. It also stands in contrast to mainline and liberal Protestantism, which have much higher degrees of engagement with society, but lack the clear group boundaries that allow group members to identify with a particular subculture.

Indeed, the second part of the theory accounts for evangelicalism's *strength* when compared to other Christian traditions:

> In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural.[29]

Smith's theory may help account for the profound impact American evangelicalism has had on U.S. culture and politics; taken together with the political history of the Evangelical Right, it is clear that this nexus of religious belief, political activism, and social belonging constitute both a movement and an identity. Because the Evangelical Right's position as a movement has been well-studied, I focus here more on

[28] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 118.

[29] Smith, 118-19.

how it functions as a collective identity - specifically, as a subcultural identity always navigating mainstream society through "distinction-with-engagement."

Niebuhr's model of Christ and culture, written before the Evangelical Right had yet emerged as a distinct political actor in the landscape of U.S. politics, demonstrates the persistence of evangelical thinking about being in-but-not-of the world, but it can only take us so far in understanding how evangelical identity is negotiated against dominant culture. Smith's subcultural identity theory takes us a bit further, explaining how American evangelicalism, a religious tradition, paved the way for the Evangelical Right, a political movement, and how "evangelical" came to function as a collective identity. In order to better understand how this subcultural identity is formed within a political movement, against an ostensibly hostile world, I will use methodological tools that come from outside evangelical thinkers and even outside of religious studies. Turning to the work of Muñoz and Sedgwick allows us to step away from conventional evangelical historiography and dig deeper into the identity formation that is enabled by the Evangelical Right's self-conception as a subculture embattled against the dominant culture.

CHAPTER 3.

THE "IN-BUT-NOT-OF" OF QUEER THEORY

It's actually not so surprising that theories of identity formation from within queer studies may help us better understand a religious-political movement, because both are fundamentally defined by a tension of being in-but-not-of the world. A crucial tension in queer theory names various ways communities of sexual and gender minorities relate to the heteronormative mainstream - a tension between assimilation and transgression, between the universal and the particular, between conformity and confrontation, between reformation and revolution - that is to say, a question of how a particular group, as it constructs a collective subcultural identity, ought to relate itself to the larger social world. Or, how we might theorize their relation to the social world, as it may not always be an active choice of engagement, but a retroactive observation of how group identity functions. On the one axis is a principle of separatism; in order to have a group identity, there must be borders to demarcate those who are "in" and "out." Far on the separatist scale are theories that subcultures or marginalized groups bond together over what makes them Other, cast *against* whatever is normative. In the religious context Smith describes this as the "sheltered enclave" theory.[1] In the history of gender and sexual minorities, the separatist tendency shows up in more militant groups that focus inward on building in-group solidarity and refusing to accept the heteronormativity of the existing system.

[1] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 75.

The other axis could be called assimilation, which is not necessarily to say subsuming a particular identity in the mainstream, but rather a relationship of engagement where the minoritized identity seeks to find respect and belonging among other groups and identities. There is often an element of the marginalized group attempting to reform the mainstream, in order to make the experiences of the group more visible or to bear greater influence upon the larger social order. Reform, on this axis, often requires working within the terms set by the hostile mainstream, rather than the revolutionary practices of separatist politics, which insist on setting their own terms for inclusion and respect.

We have already seen that the Evangelical Right comes from a long history of Protestant Christians wrestling between these axes of separatism and accommodation in order to exert social influence. Niebuhr's modes of Christ and culture articulate similar tensions, questioning whether Christians ought to meet culture on its own terms or insist on setting their own. The field of queer theory, reflecting explicitly on the experience of LGBTQ+ persons and communities as marginalized identities within an antagonistic mainstream, has wrestled with the same questions.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's early work explored these tensions of identity explicitly; in *Epistemology of the Closet*, she argues that the Western social order is marked by binaries of majority/minority identities, and has specifically been influenced - at least throughout the twentieth century - by the homo/heterosexual binary.[2] She argues

[2] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 11. It is important to note, as Sedgwick herself does, that these binaries are necessarily reductive. She does not believe that all of social life can be reduced to two vectors of identity or privilege, but reductively casting social difference as such is helpful for making a larger theoretical point about majority and minority subjectivity.

that the formulation of heterosexuality and homosexuality as a binary of social power has affected all kinds of social categories, including "secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old" and so on.[3] While Sedgwick's full theory of the closest, sexuality, and power is not entirely parallel to the concerns of subcultural religious identity and political engagement, she did introduce key rhetorical tools for thinking about marginalized social identities that are central to the topic at hand.

Much like what evangelical Christians explain as a tension between being in the world, but not of it, Sedgwick explained through the tension of "minoritizing" and "universalizing" views of sexuality. In observing the politics of the gay and lesbian social movement of her time, Sedgwick notes that the construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality as fixed identity categories necessarily involves a tension between two contradictory modes of thinking about sexual identity. The first, what she calls the "minoritizing view," views "homo/heterosexual definition…as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority."[4] In other words, sexual identity matters most to a minority of the general population - namely, those whose sexuality differs from what is considered the norm. The second mode is the "universalizing view," which considers the homo/heterosexual definition "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities."[5] The universalizing view emphasizes that sexual identity is relevant for

[3] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 11.

[4] Sedgwick, 1.

[5] Sedgwick, 1.

everyone, and that even those whose sexualities align with that which is normative still possess a sexual orientation, placing them within the matrix of hetero/homosexual definition.

By arguing that modern sexual identity exists at the tension of these views, Sedgwick means that the logic of heterosexuality and homosexual as identities always involves both (contradictory) views, not that some people hold one view or the other. Understanding that some people are straight and some people are gay (or queer, or bisexual, and so on) invokes at the same time a sense that such an identity matters specifically for those who are queer and must "come out" as something non-normative, and a sense that everyone fits into this taxonomy of identity, including those who are heterosexual and have never thought to put a name to their sexual identity. To hold a minority identity, then, following Sedgwick's logic, means to identify with a particular subcultural sense of being different from the dominant or normative identity; difference becomes key in constructing such an identity for oneself. This is what it means to operate from a minority subjectivity. At the same time, naming any axis of identity as "minoritized" implicates a universal sense in which all people can then be organized into a binary of that identity.

Let us step away from Sedgwick for a moment and preliminarily consider how this may apply to the Evangelical Right as a subcultural identity. Naming oneself as evangelical and seeing that identity as marginalized in relation to the mainstream in some way - which is key in Smith's subcultural identity theory - is important particularly to evangelicals. In the minoritizing view, that "evangelical" is a cultural minority (a view held by many evangelicals) is primarily of relevance to evangelicals themselves, and of

little concern to non-evangelicals who may or may not even know what such a name means. Indeed, Smith suggests this when surveying the attitudes of non-evangelicals, who in large numbers reported not really understanding what was distinctive about evangelicals in comparison to other Protestants.[6] At the same time, if Sedgwick's schema is instructive, naming "evangelical" as a subcultural identity places it within a social binarism. We could say literally that there is a binary between evangelical/non-evangelical, but it would be more helpful to describe this binarism using evangelicals' own axiom to be "in the world, but not of it"; since "the world" in evangelical parlance often means all secular people as well as non-evangelical Christians, we could use Sedgwick's template to suggest that there is a social binarism of "evangelical/the world." In the universalizing view, the binarism "evangelical/the world" implicates everyone into one side of the binary or the other. Sedgwick's argument - addressed to the hetero/homosexual binary but instructive for the case of the Evangelical Right's relation to culture - is that constructing an identity as marginalized in some way always involves both the minoritizing and universalizing views. In both Sedgwick's case, and in the case of the evangelical axiom to be in-but-not-of, collective subcultural identities are made possible only when one can simultaneously participate in and resist the norms of mainstream culture.[7]

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[6] Smith, *American Evangelicalism,* 180.

[7] Sedgwick's unstable cultural binaries are the result of collapsing vast arrays of social embodiments into fixed identity categories. Just as something gets lost when a wide variety of gendered and sexed experiences get collapsed into the single terms "trans" or "gay", something is also lost when experiences of religion we call Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, charismatic, evangelical, and fundamentalist are collapsed into the singular "Christian". Each of these more specific identities have their own relationships to the mainstream, but once these many sites are collapsed into a single normalizing discourse - a process which many marginalized communities participate in willingly in order to consolidate influence or power - they become part of that necessarily unstable binary. Said another way, the Evangelical Right is able to conceive of itself as in-but-not-of the world as a distinct, marginalized subculture in a way that is not

That said, the concept of a minority identity is not unproblematic. For one thing, as will become clearer in the following chapter of this paper, a subculture's self-perception of marginalization may not reflect that groups' actual practice of power and influence from an outsider perspective. All a subcultural group needs to position itself as a minority in its relation to society is the *perception* of marginalization; this minority subjectivity is then always open for contestation and doesn't always reflect actual distributions of social power. Furthermore, the dividing of social identities into opposing binarisms is more theoretical than it is real. For Sedgwick, the binary between a majority and minority identity, such as heterosexual/homosexual, is both central in the organization of the Western social order and something of a fiction. The theoretical binary itself is unstable because the majority identity needs its underside in order to be coherent. As Sedgwick explains the foundational thrust of her argument:

> The analytic move [*Epistemology of the Closet*] makes is to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions — heterosexual /homosexual, in this case—actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but, subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A.[8]

According to Sedgwick, the relationship between the identity categories heterosexual/homosexual is tenuous and unstable for three important reasons. First, *homosexual* identity is not "symmetrical with but, subordinated" to *heterosexual* identity;

available to "Baptists", "Catholics", or even "Christians." That the term is somewhat ambiguous and subsumes a wide array of religious identities under one tenuous umbrella is precisely why it allows for disidentificatory political activism, much like the term "LGBTQ+".

[8] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* 10.

that is, heterosexuality is privileged, visible, and normalized in a way homosexuality is not, and they are therefore not equally valued opposites. Second, Sedgwick calls the privileged identity "ontologically valorized" because society values being heterosexual over being homosexual; at the same time, however, heterosexuality would not exist without the abject possibility of an alternative. Indeed, heterosexuality was only coined as a distinct identity category after homosexuality. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection is helpful here: dominant identities are formed by casting off the possibilities of what we are not.[9] Smith's subcultural identity theory also affirms this principle, arguing that intergroup conflicts strengthen ingroup identity and that individuals construct their identity against negative reference groups - by comparing themselves to those others which they know they are not.[10] Third and finally, Sedgwick argues that it is impossible to determine which identity within such a binary is the more important one: the supposed "central" identity or "marginal" identity, since one is privileged and "ontologically valorized" yet requires the possibility of the other in order to retain any meaning or significance at all. Sedgwick, then, allows us to conceptualize "minority" as a subjective position from which a subculture can relate to the larger social world, while also reminding us that such a conception can never capture the full complexity of social identities and power.

[9] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). See also Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 90. Butler argues that if one is ostensibly heterosexual and cannot fathom being queer, that unthinkability haunts by becoming a phantasm, necessarily lurking as an always potential danger in order to make one's heterosexuality normative and fixed against the abject.

[10] Smith, *American Evangelicalism,* 104-5.

Being in the world as a subcultural minority, but not entirely of the world of hegemonic norms, is a central tenet of social identity that informs both queer theorists and evangelical historians. Writing from very different contexts and for very different purposes, Niebuhr and Sedgwick both describe a tension of being set-apart from, yet forced to live within, the world of dominant culture as central to American social life. By constructing a subcultural identity (the Evangelical Right, the LGBTQ+ community) as a minority with a dominant opposite ("the world," heteronormativity), such a group opens up a minority subjectivity from which to relate to the dominant culture, regardless of the ways in which they, too, belong to dominant culture. However, naming this fact of social identity does not in itself explain anything about the political engagement practices of the Evangelical Right in the 1970s. To explain more specifically how minority subjectivity translates to political engagement, we turn to one of Sedgwick's students, José Esteban Muñoz.

Disidentifications and the Minoritarian Subject

While *Epistemology of the Closet* employs a deconstructive method that exposes normative identities as contingent upon marginalized identities, Muñoz's first book, *Disidentifications*, focuses on how minority subjects navigate identity formation within the realm of dominant ideology. That is to say, while Sedgwick is useful for problematizing whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness, exposing them as unstable fictions, Muñoz demonstrates how subjects who cannot access those fictions nevertheless develop a sense of self within the worlds defined by them. Muñoz acknowledges, along with Sedgwick, that identity is elusive and never as stable as it seems; at the same time, it

is identities perceived to be the most stable (such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness) that have the most power to shape our social worlds.

Muñoz's theory of disidentification - the primary thesis of his text and the theory that is most helpful for understanding the identity-forming practices of the Evangelical Right - hinges on the different practices of what he calls minoritarian and majoritarian subjectivities. While he affirms that all subjects may be formed "through multiple and sometimes conflicting sites of identification," he calls those subjects majoritarian who can access "the fiction of identity…with relative ease."[11] Minoritarian subjects, the protagonists of *Disidentifications*, are those "subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny" - that, is subjects who cannot access normative identities within such cultural logics in one or more ways.[12] In the case of queer subjects, and queer people of color in particular, a minority subjectivity is not simply a result of a subculture's perception of themselves as marginalized, but the result of other kinds of subjectivities being closed off and denied to them. Much like we have seen in Smith and Sedgwick, minority identities are constructed against what one is not - in Muñoz's case, being queer and racialized is a result of being excluded from the dominant cultural logics of whiteness and heteronormativity. Yet queer and racialized subjects must still live within and navigate these cultural logics in their everyday lives. Becoming a "minoritarian subject within the majoritarian public sphere," then, results in a contradictory and fragmented subjectivity.[13] For Muñoz,

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[11] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

[12] Muñoz, 5.

[13] Muñoz, 95.

however, this is not the end of the story. He describes the efforts of minoritarian subjects to find themselves within dominant culture "misrecognition" and notes that this process "can be *tactical*. Identification itself can also be manipulated and worked in ways that promise narratives of self that surpass the limits prescribed by the dominant culture."[14] This is where Muñoz's key term, disidentification, emerges.

For Muñoz, disidentification is a way out of some of the fraught binary tensions between assimilation and separatism. Muñoz echoes Niebuhr, Smith, and Sedgwick in observing multiple ways for minoritarian subjects to engage with dominant culture. Borrowing language from French linguist Micel Pêcheux's use of Louis Althusser, Muñoz explains that subjects are formed in relation to the "inescapable realm" of ideology - that is, the cultural logics of dominant culture.[15] Subjects can identify with the norms of dominant culture, as in an assimilation or accommodation paradigm. Alternatively, subjects can reject and rebel against such norms, as in a separatist or utopian paradigm. Both options pose problems for the minoritarian subject attempting to carve out a place in mainstream culture. In the first case, a mode Muñoz calls *identification*, minoritarian subjects can never fully access the privileges afforded to those who can fit neatly into normative identities, even if they may come closer through attempts at identification. In the second case, what Muñoz calls *counteridentification*, Pêcheux warns that rebelling in pure opposition to a dominant ideology may actually reinforce its dominance, validating its influence through "controlled symmetry."[16]

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[14] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 95. (Emphasis in original).

[15] Muñoz, 11.

[16] Muñoz, 11.

Identification and counteridentification both leave the minoritarian subject without much political recourse or influence, which leads Muñoz (following Pêcheux) to a third option. "Disidentification," he writes, "is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly oppose it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."[17] Far from simply being a theory of cultural engagement, disidentification for Muñoz is a political strategy, an active resistance and refiguring of cultural artifacts and powers. Because Muñoz observes this strategy specifically within the performances, media, and art of queer people of color, he identifies it as a matter of political urgency; he writes that "disidentification is more than simply an interpretative turn or a psychic maneuver; it is, most crucially, a survival strategy."[18]

Disidentificatory practices are the efforts of minoritarian subjects to "work on and against" dominant culture in order to transform it into something more welcoming to one's subcultural identity. Throughout his book, Muñoz offers several examples of disidentificatory practices from queer people of color in the realms of media, art, and politics. Among these examples that Muñoz explores in depth are artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and drag queen Vaginal Creme Davis. Influenced by Andy Warhol, Basquiat's disidentification involved his reworking of pop art into a site for artistic resistance as a queer black artist; he recycled themes of trademark, brand, and commodity into critiques of "high" art without completely distancing himself from that world.[19] Davis, whose

[17] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11. Muñoz cites Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

[18] Muñoz, 18.

[19] Muñoz, 37-51.

stage name was inspired by activist Angela Davis, intentionally performed a punk rock style of drag that rejected attempts to "pass" as traditionally feminine, instead calling attention to the out-of-place intersection of being queer, Black, and gender transgressive; at the same time, Davis's disidentificatory style of drag still relied, to some degree, on commercial and recognizable forms of performance in order to make its point.[20]

Working with examples in media studies, Muñoz also describes disidentification "as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance. Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production."[21] Disidentificatory practices offer a way for the minoritarian subject to exist within the matrices of dominant culture without assimilating to them and a way to resist the prevailing norms of a society without eschewing participation in society outright. It is through disidentification, Muñoz argues, that minoritized subjects like queers of color are able to attain cultural influence and political power in a world of norms that they otherwise do not fit into.

The Disidentification Paradox of the Evangelical Right

Now that I have surveyed the history of the Evangelical Right, how the movement facilitates the construction of "evangelical" as a subcultural identity, and the theoretical tools of minority subjectivity and disidentification developed by Sedgwick and Muñoz, let us attempt to address the central paradox of the Evangelical Right's use of disidentificatory practices.

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[20] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 97-101.

[21] Muñoz, 25.

According to Muñoz, minoritarian subjects engage in disidentificatory practices both for personal and public purposes. At the level of individual identity, disidentification allows these subjects to carve out a place for themselves in culture, often reworking cultural artifacts, dominant ideologies, and public events in ways to include their experience; in this way, someone can envision a culture that recognizes their experience of gender, sex, ability, religion, and so on. In envisioning space for oneself, that space can be created. Muñoz writes that "To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject."[22] This is especially evident in Muñoz's studies of queer performance artists. He writes that before the era of gay liberation, cross-identification with "opera queens" offered a way for gay men in particular "a practice of *transfiguring* an identificatory site that was not meant to accommodate male identities" and that this practice is "an important identity-consolidating hub."[23]

David Halperin has written extensively about the practice of gay male culture's appreciation and adoption of the straight woman figure in media, a practice which Halperin calls gay identification. At its core, Halperin sees this identification as a process of working on and against ostensibly heterosexual media for queer reinterpretation; gay identification, cross-identification, and disidentification then, are all different ways that Halperin and Muñoz name the same phenomenon.[24] Muñoz and Halperin are not alone among queer theorists; the process of reworking mainstream culture in order to carve out

[22] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

[23] Muñoz, 31. (Emphasis in original).

[24] David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 257, 374, 409, 422.

rhetorical and conceptual space for one's minoritized identity - or, in Foucaultian terms, to offer up alternative discourses to the heteronormative mainstream - is a key survival strategy for minority subjects.

Survival through contesting normative discourses also operates at the level of collective identity. Disidentificatory practices allow subjects to imagine different "life-worlds," as Muñoz describes it, not only creating space for marginalized individuals to see themselves represented in mainstream culture, but crafting counterpublic spheres in which culture itself is transfigured into something more "smoky, mysterious, and ultimately contestatory."[25] For Muñoz, disidentification is a political strategy, even if and when it fails to dismantle white supremacy or heteronormativity at the structural level, because it creates alternative structures where new norms can be established, formed with the very material of dominant culture - similar to Smith's concept of the "sacred umbrella."[26] In the public sphere, then, disidentificatory practices are those practices of minoritized subjects that engage with, reproduce, and reference mainstream cultural objects and, at the same time, unsettle and disrupt their claims to normativity.

In the following chapter, I will demonstrate a few of the ways that the Evangelical Right began to use disidentificatory practices in their 1970s turn toward political activism; I call these practices disidentificatory because, like the practices of queer artists of color in Muñoz's work, they originate from a subcultural group which attempts to leverage its otherness to rework and reform the dominant culture. Returning to Sedgwick's formula, the Evangelical Right engages in these practices from the binarism

[25] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 34.

[26] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 106.

of "evangelical/the world"; because, *in their perception of their own community*, the Evangelical Right occupies a subcultural space that is not represented or welcomed in the mainstream. This binarism is, like all of Sedgwick's binaries, unstable; the concept of "the world" as the privileged and "ontologically valorized" identity only exists against the possibility of "evangelical" as an alternative identity. Just as heterosexuality is a meaningless concept without the possibility of homosexuality, so "the world" is only coherent as far as it defines the cultural norm as *not*-evangelical.

This is where the comparison between the binarisms begins to fall apart. Sedgwick's argument that the hetero/homosexual binary is a fundamental organizing principle of the twentieth century Western social order is based on decades of discourse and cultural production that reinforces those identities as socially meaningful. Importantly, the hetero/homosexual binary has been given significance both by those who advocate for such terms' usefulness and by those who oppose them; it exists at the tension of universalizing and minoritizing views. In contrast, my suggestion that "evangelical/the world" operates as a similar binarism is novel and has not had a comparable history of discourse and attention to make it a significant site of analysis. Likewise, it is rather one-sided; while the distinction between "evangelical/the world" is an important identity construction for those within the Evangelical Right, it is not a distinction that most outsiders would likely recognize as consequential. While there can be said to be a minoritizing view of evangelical identity as such (that it matters particularly to those *within* the Evangelical Right), there is not much of a corresponding universalizing view (that "evangelical/the world" is an organizing binarism for those *outside* of the Evangelical Right).

As Smith has noted, outsiders may not even be able to tell you the distinction between the two identities "evangelical/the world."[27] This is because, despite the Evangelical Right's own perception, there isn't enough of a distinction between the two to make disidentification a legible strategy for a minoritized evangelical identity. For the Evangelical Right, "the world" is personified by liberals, feminist academics, and advocates for homosexuality and abortion rights. Earlier evangelical traditions may have identified "the world" as anything antagonistic to Protestant Christian theology: communism, powers of Satan, even Catholicism. In the mid- to late-1970s, however, the Evangelical Right was able to rhetorically consolidate all of its antagonists into a singular identity: secular humanism.[28] This consolidation allowed leaders of the Evangelical Right to use shorthand to capture all of the cultural institutions which they saw as hostile to their political goals. When Falwell founded the Moral Majority in 1979 - a key moment in the establishment of the Evangelical Right - he explicitly did so to mobilize conservative evangelicals against what he saw as the moral decay of the nation, specifically naming secular humanism as the enemy.[29]

This association between "the world" and secular humanism is a fundamental organizing idea in the Evangelical Right. Operating from a subcultural identity, the Evangelical Right uses disidentificatory practices to transform the dominant culture; from this perspective, "the world" of secular humanism is the dominant culture. However, if one believes Muñoz's characterization, dominant culture is that which is shaped by the

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[27] Smith, *American Evangelicalism,* 180.

[28] Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 133-134.

[29] Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 291.

logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny. From many outsiders' perspectives, too, the Evangelical Right is actually deeply embedded within these cultural logics, rather than resisting them. From the perspective of a queer of color critique, the world of dominant culture isn't hostile to the Evangelical Right; if anything, that movement shares the same underlying values of white, male, heteronormative hegemony that Muñoz would say characterize dominant culture. In the Evangelical Right's perspective, an evangelical Protestant hegemony may have once guided dominant American culture, but that its influence has been lost at least since the 1920s. From an outsider perspective, that hegemony may have waned throughout the twentieth century, but is still deeply embedded within the logics of dominant culture to this day.

The Evangelical Right's use of disidentificatory practices fails for their intended goal of unsettling secular humanism and transforming culture to be more like the Evangelical Right because they have misidentified the dominant culture that they attempt to disidentify against. Disidentification, in Muñoz's construction, works to wrest hegemonic power away from the mainstream by working "on and against" its norms in order to carve out cultural space for the disidentifying subject. The Evangelical Right, however, positions themselves with a minority subjectivity to accumulate power for their own identity; but because their identity in actuality reflects the norms dominant culture, their disidentification actually reinforces the very power of "the world" that they claim to be victimized by. The following chapter explores a few of the practices the Evangelical Right adopted in the 1970s that illustrate this paradox and how it both perpetuates the movement's self-perception as a minority and yet continues to fail in creating a counterpublic that unsettles existing norms.

CHAPTER 4.

EVANGELICAL DISIDENTIFICATIONS:

RIGHTS, RHETORIC, AND REPRESENTATIONS

In *Disidentifications,* Muñoz offers several case studies that analyze various cultural strategies of disidentification employed by queer people of color. In this final chapter, I will attempt to sketch out some of the disidentificatory practices employed by the Evangelical Right, specifically locating the origins of those practices in the late 1970s. As subcultural tools, these practices accomplish what Smith calls "engagement-with-distinction."[1] Internally, they work to strengthen group identity through conflict, tension, and distinction from other groups within American culture; externally, they attempt to transform society without either completely resisting or accommodating its dominant ideologies and norms. As Smith suggests, these evangelical practices may in actuality be quite successful at solidifying a strong sense of in-group identity and rather unsuccessful at actually transforming culture, but both are important goals of disidentificatory practices, despite how successful or unsuccessful each may be.[2]

To use three cursory examples of how the Evangelical Right has employed disidentificatory practices, I focus on the Evangelical Right's founding of explicitly political organizations, the rhetorical use of mass media and television to strengthen a subcultural identity, and the expansion of a distinctly evangelical consumer culture. I use

[1] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 104-105.

[2] Smith, 178-179.

these examples because each of them can be demonstrated through well-known organizations, leaders, and media used by conservative evangelicals in the late 1970s, and each of them continue to be important to the Evangelical Right matrix of subcultural identity today. Since these are only introductory examples, and are not exhaustive of the ways the Evangelical Right engages in disidentificatory practices, they necessarily focus on a top-down analysis of the subculture; in writing about the beliefs and activities of conservative evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and the organizations they founded, I am inevitably privileging the perspectives of an Evangelical Right establishment. A fuller picture of evangelicalism as a subcultural identity would need to evaluate not only the practices of the movement's leaders, but also of everyday practitioners; ethnographic and sociological research in this area help provide important context.[3] That said, the following examples begin to suggest ways in which the paradox of the Evangelical Right's disidentification with culture have played out in the movement's history.

Evangelical Rights: Institutionalizing Political Activism

It wasn't until the 1970s that evangelicals began to organize heavily through institutions whose express purpose was impacting U.S. electoral and legislative politics. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, a plethora of conservative evangelical leaders and organizations rose to the public eye and began to exert a real influence on the politics of

[3] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 119. Smith offers sociological data on evangelicals' behavior. For one ethnographic study of everyday evangelicals that touches on U.S. politics, see Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey Into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

the nation. The Family Research Council (Gary Bauer), Concerned Women for America (Beverly LaHaye), the Moral Majority (Jerry Falwell), the Christian Coalition (Pat Robertson), and Focus on the Family (James Dobson) were all major players in the newly formed Evangelical Right coalition that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century.[4]

Jerry Falwell's turn toward political action from the 1960s to his founding of the Moral Majority - as mentioned in Chapter 1 - demonstrates a shift in the Evangelical Right's political philosophy from separatism to activism. Even in making this shift, however, Evangelical Right leaders had a complicated relationship with politics. When pushed, Falwell still believed, as he did in 1965, that real change happens from the inside out. In his own telling, the Evangelical Right's turn toward political organization was a necessary response to the hostility of mainstream culture, not their preferred mode of action. In 1995, Falwell reflected on his turn to political involvement, noting that in the 1960s he "still had the confidence then that government, the courts, the Congress, would correct these social ills" and that it was when these institutions failed to act in ways Falwell and his peers deemed appropriate that he realized "I was wrong, and later, of course, became very involved."[5]

The attitude of some Evangelical Right leaders was a resigned, defensive position toward political organizing. Reproducing the same attitudes of Billy Graham decades earlier, they believed that Christians should be focused on conversion and biblical

[4] Eithne Johnson, "The Emergence of Christian Video and the Cultivation of Videoevangelism," in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right,* ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 193.

[5] William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 70.

education, not politics. At the same time, they believed that increased hostility towards evangelical values from the government, media, and culture warranted significant energy spent mobilizing conservative Protestants to get involved in politics through voter registration, awareness raising campaigns, and in some cases, even nonviolent protest. By adopting this attitude towards political organizing - that it is not a Christian's primary mission but it is nevertheless essential in order to preserve the valuation of Christian beliefs in the public sphere - the Evangelical Right was taking a posture of disidentification in political action. They believed that politics were the realm of the world, and yet, they had a responsibility to use the world's own methods in order to ensure evangelical voices had a seat at the table of public discourse.

Though some accounts tell the story of the Evangelical Right as though its members were simply power-hungry, willing to use whatever methods necessary to Christianize America, the reality seems to have been more complicated than that. While some of the leaders of the Evangelical Right were certainly calculated political strategists, many ordinary conservative evangelicals simply wanted to live in a culture where their beliefs and way of life were valued. Smith argues that evangelical political action is complicated by an irresolvable tension between two distinctly American evangelical principles: individual voluntarism and absolutism. Evangelicalism, as something of an American civil religion, holds the principle of voluntarism in high regard, believing that people "should be free to live as they see fit, even if that means rejecting Christianity"; this belief aligns with the conservatism of the Evangelical Right, which often emphasizes a belief in smaller government and less political intervention into

their everyday lives.[6] At the same time, many evangelicals have a sense of moral absolutism, believing that "Christian morality should be the primary authority for American culture and society."[7] Smith goes on to explain how this paradox of "voluntaristic absolutism" has prevented evangelicals from participating in political action that successfully transforms culture, leaving them trapped at a crossroads:

> Historically, this voluntaristic absolutism dilemma was fairly easily resolved in that orthodox Protestantism, although officially disestablished, in fact for centuries dominated America's public discourse and its major cultural institutions. By failing to see the degree to which theirs was an imposed domination, the Protestant establishment had its cake and ate it too: it enjoyed a "Christian America" that it believed was voluntarily chosen by the American people. But since evangelicalism has increasingly lost control of the public discourse produced by major cultural institutions...since the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of evangelicals who want to affirm both absolutism and individual voluntarism face an increasingly uncomfortable cognitive dissonance.[8]

The work of the Evangelical Right's political organizations - such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition - are engaged in a sort of disidentification at this crossroads of voluntaristic absolutism. They both maintain the belief that evangelism is more important than politics and yet raise and spend considerable funds focused solely on political lobbying and mobilizing evangelical influence on electoral politics. Though some of these organizations, including Falwell's Moral Majority, had disbanded by the 1990s, political activism by the Evangelical Right has continued to this day. In the years since its emergence, the Evangelical Right has continued to use electoral politics as an avenue for exerting influence on the nation, even seeing some of its own enter into offices of major political influence, such as Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and

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[6] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 210.

[7] Smith, 210

[8] Smith, 213.

Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore.[9] In the 1970s, resentment against an encroaching secular government was one of the primary catalysts for the Evangelical Right; at the same time, increased evangelical presence in government quickly became the goal for this new wave of political organizations.[10] This is how political organizing functions as a disidentificatory practice for the Evangelical Right; despite the Evangelical Right's success at exerting some influence in national politics, they still view national politics as belonging to the realm of "the world" and therefore remain antagonistic to it. Disidentification helps name how Evangelical Right activists are able to justify their focus on being involved in national politics yet rallying around an ethos of anti-government sentiment. Through the mobilization of the movement in the 1970s, politics became a realm of dominant culture that evangelicals could disidentify with, working on and against for their own purposes.

Evangelical Rhetoric: Subculture on Television and Radio

A second disidentificatory practice employed by the Evangelical Right focuses on the platforming of conservative evangelical values in a landscape of media dominated by "the world." From the perspective of the Evangelical Right, cultural arenas that control access to information and media - television, radio, academia, publishing, and so on - are dominated by feminists, liberals, and secular humanists that embody a cultural identity antithetical to evangelicals' own. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, evangelicals

[9] Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 510, 570.

[10] Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 164.

made massive inroads in using broadcasting, publishing, and the establishment of their own educational institutions as a way to offer religious content to a wide audience beyond the walls of the church.[11] With the emergence of the Evangelical Right as a politically active movement, its leaders and strategists saw great potential in these media enterprises for disseminating the rhetoric of their movement, helping to craft a cultural consensus on who exactly this Evangelical Right was through shared language and imagery. Julia Lesage analyzes the power of the Evangelical Right's use of rhetoric and media, focusing particularly on the organizations of Pat Robertson: the Christian Coalition, *The 700 Club,* and the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). For Lesage, rhetoric is the glue that allows a subculture to conceive of its own boundaries and media is the vehicle through which that rhetoric is disseminated.[12] "Subcultures govern style, both lifestyle and language style," she writes.[13]

One of the key features of Evangelical Right media - especially in the case of Robertson's media empire - is the refiguring of discourse on social issues from the realm of the public sphere to the smaller plane of "individual moral will and the family."[14] In radio and television talk shows, Evangelical Right media moguls regularly commented on current events and social issues, but regularly framed them as they relate to the nuclear family, avoiding discussions about group rights and public responsibility. In this way,

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[11] Martin, *With God on Our Side,* 17-18.

[12] Julia Lesage, "Christian Coalition Leadership Training," in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 297.

[13] Lesage, "Christian Coalition Leadership Training," 298.

[14] Julia Lesage, "Christian Media," in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right,* ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 44.

they were able to offer Christian media as alternatives to mainstream media; after all, wouldn't you want to get your news from a fellow member of your own subculture rather than from a station run by secular humanists? By offering shows like *The 700 Club* as an uncontroversial alternative to regular network television, Robertson was able to broadcast a common shared language for conservative Christians everywhere, which crafted a good-versus-evil narrative in which the nuclear family was cast as the protagonist in opposition to the villain of secular humanism.[15] Though the show began in 1966, it shifted along with the rest of the Evangelical Right towards more explicitly political commentary in the 1970s. The show became its own form of Smith's "sacred umbrella," a way for evangelicals to stay informed about current events and news in a subculture-approved environment. As Lesage writes, "*The 700 Club* has become the vehicle par excellence for letting evangelicals enter the modern world while avoiding the feared pitfalls of 'modernism.'"[16]

The 700 Club - and other radio and television shows like it - allow its viewers to disidentify both with current media forms and their content. Far from allowing radio, television, and later, the Internet, to be exclusively secular realms, the Evangelical Right strategically works on and against these mediums and imbued them with their own messaging in order to strengthen the sense of in-group identity. Indeed, in a seemingly non-threatening way, the Evangelical Right's media rhetoric further solidifies the vastly different identities of "evangelical/the world." In Lesage's assessment,

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[15] Razelle Frankl, "Transformation of Televangelism: Repackaging Christian Family Values," in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 177-78.

[16] Lesage, "Christian Media," 43.

> Words that indicate consensus about the malevolent forces in society are used to refer to the media, immigrants, public schools, illegitimacy, welfare, 'redistributionist' economics, the counterculture…, multiculturalism, homosexuality, feminism, government spending (except on the military), and any indication that gender roles might be socially constructed. Not only does the religious right articulate such a moral consensus, it has also developed a media-savvy, politically active, interconnected subculture.[17]

Through this rhetoric, Evangelical Right media is able to achieve engagement-with-distinction, consolidating everything that is *not*-evangelical as *anti*-evangelical using the very same cultural media forms used by the institutions it opposes. As Frankl observes, most members of this movement see "enemies of the family everywhere, working to destroy this holiest of institutions."[18] Media like Robertson's become both one of many options in a sea of consumer options and a rhetorical vehicle for strengthening the position of the Evangelical Right as an embattled minority within dominant culture.

Evangelical Representations: Subculture Through Consumerism

A third disidentificatory practice of the Evangelical Right was born out of a shift in evangelical media from national broadcasts like *The 700 Club* to media targeted at individual consumers. While Christian radio and television often emphasized the importance of the home and family, these programs were ultimately business enterprises; they were well-orchestrated tools manufactured by a relatively centralized group of strategists, leaders, and institutions.[19] In order for ordinary evangelicals to fully embody

[17] Lesage, "Christian Coalition Leadership Training," 298.

[18] Frankl, "Transformation of Televangelism," 177.

[19] Lesage, "Christian Coalition Leadership Training," 321.

the rhetoric and values of the Evangelical Right, they needed ways to participate in the evangelical media enterprise themselves, rather than simply receiving it passively from an authoritative source. What emerged was a business model in which the Evangelical Right offered ways for people to engage with their evangelical identity in every way imaginable: in the clothes they wore, the books they read, the toys they bought their children, and the way they decorated their homes. The business of being evangelical facilitated a transformation of "Christian" into an adjective that could be applied to all kinds of consumer goods.

Eithne Johnson traces the empire of James Dobson's *Focus on the Family*, which disseminated Evangelical Right rhetoric - both religious and political - not just through national television programs, but through home video. Just as evangelicals made use of radio when it became widely available, and then television when TV sets became common household items, so too they made use of new technologies like VCRs and the Internet in the last quarter of the twentieth century. These expanding ventures worked to establish an evangelical "parallel media industry," that reflects a "'faith in technology' to spread their salvation message through new communication channels, to reach beyond their cultural separatism."[20] Dobson was eager to take advantage of new technologies and began producing a series of "talking heads" lifestyle home videos in the late 1970s, only a few short years after the consumer VCR was introduced.[21]

As the Evangelical Right matured, media moguls like Robertson, Dobson, and others expanded into whatever new technology markets were available to them. This

[20] Johnson, "Christian Video," 191.

[21] Johnson, 194.

reflected a larger pattern of evangelical consumerism. Lesage notes that for any subculture, rituals "build and constantly reaffirm community" and that "[t]elevision lets viewers constantly perform one of the key rituals of capitalism, one that reinforces Americans' most prized shared value, that is, the ritual of consumption."[22] The emergence of the Evangelical Right must be understood alongside its context in American consumer culture. While its turn to political activism offered a vehicle for its members to affirm a sense of subcultural belonging, this was solidified by the expansion of a distinctly evangelical consumer culture.

With consumer culture, identity becomes something that can be packaged, replicated, and sold; finding oneself represented in culture is as simple as finding a product marketed to your particular subcultural identity. More than just traditional broadcasting in radio and television, the Evangelical Right offered representations for ordinary evangelicals through Christian bookstores, Christian rock music, Christian fiction publishing houses, Christian children's shows, and more. Anything that secular culture could produce, evangelicals could produce, marketed towards an explicitly Christian audience. Kristin Kobes du Mez has argued that this consumer culture was born out of the mid-century neo-evangelical era; as the evangelical tradition began to move away from theological distinctives in favor of building a more broad, transdenominational coalition, "Christian living" books, along with music, radio, and television, "helped create an identity based around a more generic evangelical ethos."[23]

[22] Lesage, "Christian Media," 43.

[23] Kristin Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 30.

Anthea Butler has also demonstrated that this consumer culture worked to maintain white hegemony in evangelicalism without invoking explicitly racial themes; Christian music, radio, and talk shows could feature non-threatening representations of Black evangelicals, what she calls "performances of 'Christian Blackness'," at the same time that the Evangelical Right political organizations were lobbying against civil rights legislation.[24] Through cultural productions meant to inform, educate, or entertain, the Evangelical Right was able to offer ordinary evangelicals ways to disidentify with every possible form of mainstream culture, sanctified by the messaging and values of their own subculture. In this way, evangelicals could find representations of themselves in the forms, if not the content, of mainstream culture, while reinforcing the racial, theological, social, and political beliefs of the Evangelical Right.

Whether through political organizations, national media, and consumer goods, the Evangelical Right has continued to find ways of repurposing mainstream culture to further solidify a sense of evangelical identity among its constituents. It is now possible for an evangelical to get all of their political commentary from explicitly evangelical news sources, to watch exclusively evangelical television programming, and to shop exclusively at evangelical stores or websites. These avenues are all examples of disidentification, as they depend on forms of mainstream culture while reinforcing a subcultural identity that views the mainstream as hostile. To use Muñoz's language, these

[24] Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 80-81.

enterprises are tactical strategies of misrecognition that enable the Evangelical Right to be in-but-not-of the world.[25]

[25] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

CHAPTER 5.

CONCLUSION

This project has attempted to show, through one particular site of analysis, how queer theory and its methodologies may function as a lens through which to study the history of evangelicalism in the United States. It has demonstrated that the theoretical tools put forth by Muñoz and Sedgwick provide new ways to make sense of the Evangelical Right's turn toward political engagement in the late 1970s. By putting these disparate fields of study in conversation with each other, new tensions, paradoxes, and themes emerge, shedding light on how the political ambitions of the Evangelical Right can be both deeply culturally influential while continuing to reinforce the movement's self-perception as minoritized.

As Smith and others have demonstrated, similar subcultural strategies of engagement-with-distinction lend both minority political movements and American evangelicalism to strong subcultural identities with high levels of vitality. Yet, where civil rights and gay liberation movements succeed in making some social changes, by leveraging their engagement-with-distinction to transform cultural systems through alternative practices, countercultural critiques, and collective action or protest, the Evangelical Right largely fails to transform mainstream culture at large, by wielding only volunteerism, individualism, and a personal influence strategy that leaves existing social systems largely intact.[1]

[1] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 187-203.

The Evangelical Right, since its emergence in the late 1970s, has set out to transform culture through disidentificatory practices in the hopes that society would better reflect the values of their own subculture. However, their perceived binarism of "evangelical/the world" does not hold up in the same way that binarisms like "homo/heterosexual" or "Black/white" do, because the distinction between "evangelical" and "the world" does not have a universalizing component: it is not a significant organizing idea for most people outside the evangelical subculture. Because the fundamental binarism from which they construct a minority subjectivity does not hold the same weight as the subjectivity of queers of color, their disidentificatory practices lack the same transformative effectiveness.

This is certainly not everything that could be said about Evangelical Right identity and politics; indeed, the theoretical lenses offered here are only one way of explaining the history of this movement's turn to political activism. There may be elements of this history that Muñoz and Sedgwick's theory are not equipped to address. This paper has not resolved the paradox of the Evangelical Right's disidentifications; it has only named it with some specificity and offered some robust theoretical tools for analyzing how it operates. Naming a complex social phenomenon as such, however, is powerful. As Muñoz himself writes, naming ideologies for what they are works to undermine and contest the supposed self-evidence from which ideology draws its power.[2]

Employing Muñoz and Sedgwick in this way suggests that the sources, norms, and methods of queer theory may offer a new frame for doing a historiography of

[2] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 168.

evangelicalism. These fields may be unfamiliar bedfellows, but the preceding arguments demonstrate the analytical potential for putting them in conversation. It is not self-evident how these insights may translate with other methods and other frames; other queer theorists may offer other tools that may provide different analyses on the political influence of the Evangelical Right, whether in the 1970s or in the 2020s. These other connections can and should be explored beyond the scope of this paper. I have attempted to employ what queer theorist Jack Halberstam calls a "scavenger methodology," promiscuously using ways of thinking and doing analysis from across disparate fields of study in order to provide new pathways of understanding.[3] As the Evangelical Right has only continued to become more politically influential in the present decade, the need for more queer theorists promiscuously exploring evangelical history continues as well.

[3] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 13.

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