

**“Thank You God for Making Me Cute!”
Negotiating Bodies, Power, and Religious
Meaning in Christian Evangelical Fashion and
Beauty Ministries for Teenage Girls**

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Inside a plush, newly-remodeled venue still smelling of fresh paint and Lysol, eight hundred well-coiffed women and girls cheer enthusiastically, yelling “Work it, girl!” and periodically jumping out of their seats with excitement. A modern dance troupe adorned with multicolored arm bands and fringed scrunchies dazzles audience members with a routine set to Daft Punk’s “Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger.” Teenage girls strut down the runway, swishing their skirts and flipping their hair with great panache, as colored lights move to the beat of Madonna’s “Vogue.” Parents beam. Cameras flash. Shari Braendel strides onstage and invokes Jesus.

This performance, while potentially baffling to the uninitiated, is commonplace in Braendel’s ministries for teen girls. Braendel travels to conservative evangelical churches and private schools around the country to deliver the gospel through her “Modest is Hottest Fashion Show and Real Beauty Workshop” and her “What TO Wear: Fashion and Beauty Tips for Christian Girls” speaking events.¹ She’s one of a growing number of entrepreneurial women who adopt mainstream iconography and focus on issues of “worldly” beauty and fashion in an effort to capture the spiritual attention of teenage girls. Included in her midst are women like Mayra Gomez, founder of the Model4Jesus fashion show ministry, which entreats hopeful teen models to

Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs, College of Charleston
Volume 9 (2010): 19-46

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foreground the “image and character of Jesus Christ and His calling on their lives” (Model4Jesus); Tammy Bennett, founder of Makeover Ministries, which “encourages gals to look good from the inside out and be super(role)models for Christ” (Makeover Ministries); and Ginger Garrett, author of Christian beauty books for teen girls and their mothers, including *Beauty Secrets of the Bible: The Ancient Arts of Beauty and Fragrance* and *Queen Esther’s Secrets of Womanhood: A Biblical Rite of Passage for Your Daughter*.

Each of these projects reflects a paradoxical melding of sensationalistic, mainstream media motifs and conservative Christian ideology, thus locating these evangelical fashion and beauty ministries firmly within what philosopher Susan Bordo calls the “postmodern kaleidoscope” of contemporary Western culture. According to Bordo, this cultural landscape is characterized by its “inclination toward the unstable, fluid, fragmented, indeterminate, ironic, and heterogenous, for that which resists definition, closure, and fixity” (38). I approach this project with an appreciation for the recurring paradoxes and ironies of evangelical fashion; my central goal is to articulate the myriad ways in which evangelical girls negotiate both the evangelical subculture and the larger cultural sphere, selectively yielding to and resisting a multitude of conflicting messages as they construct their identities. I intend to focus specifically on the presence of two well-worn Western cultural tropes within these domains – female submission and corporality – and investigate the ways in which these constructs are transmitted through the evangelical fashion and beauty industry and Western culture at large to teen girls across the country. I intend, also, to consider the ways in which contemporary evangelical fashion and beauty ministries might provide girls with a framework for resistance and may, in fact, transgress gender norms in their own right. Ultimately, I hope to reveal girls’ remarkable resilience and creativity in this cultural context, where, I argue, they must not only navigate misogynistic historical doctrines but must also work through the commodification of their bodies and spiritualities.

While this is certainly not the first study of Protestant evangelism or girls’ lives and experiences in the contemporary United States, it is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to investigate the lives and experiences of Protestant evangelical girls *per se*. The paucity of

research on this topic is somewhat surprising, given the applicability of gender-specific ministries and the girls that attend them to the fields of feminist, religious, and cultural studies. The foundation for such an investigation has been laid, however, by feminist scholars in the fields of girls' studies and religious studies. Research by scholars like Angela McRobbie, Anita Harris, and Mary Celeste Kearney in the emergent discipline of girls' studies challenges the privileging of boys in youth and cultural studies, demonstrating instead a "consistent commitment to researching girlhood and girls' culture as unique social formations" (Kearney 1).² Girls' studies scholars often speak to the ways girls negotiate postmodern "kaleidoscope culture," as well, adopting an empathic lens with a focus on girls' creativity and autonomy.

In the field of religious studies, feminist ethnographers like Julie Ingersoll, Christel Manning, and R. Marie Griffith have conducted similarly empathic and nuanced research into the lives of women in the conservative evangelical tradition.³ Griffith, in particular, has interrogated evangelical women's struggles with power, submission, and embodiment through admirable ethnographic and historical research. Her studies delve into the subtleties of evangelical women's lives, contributing to what Griffith calls a "central feminist goal: a heightened understanding of 'other' – read 'nonfeminist' – women, who challenge particular assumptions and contradictions within feminist thought and thereby help both to expand and to refine feminism's possibilities" (*God's Daughters* 12). It is at the intersection of these two innovative fields – girls' studies and feminist religious studies – that I position my own work.

In this paper, I hope to investigate evangelical girls' lives and their experiences with power and embodiment. Such an analysis implies a scrupulous investigation of primary sources, including articles from evangelical Christian magazines for teenage girls and personal interviews with Braendel and Garrett, two of the entrepreneurial evangelical women referenced above. Information from these sources will, in turn, be grounded in the experiences shared by the three fifteen-year-old evangelical girls I spoke with: Caroline Bain, an enthusiastic attendant of beauty and fashion ministries; Josephine Wright, member of the evangelical Young Life ministry; and Leanne MacIntyre, who generally approaches church with apathy but nevertheless attends

evangelical ministries with her friends.⁴

The Legacy of Female Subjugation in the Christian West

In an effort to contextualize, analyze, and problematize the ministries at hand, this study will first critique the rhetoric of the “twin sins” of the female sex within the context of evangelical fashion and beauty productions and Western culture at large. These two “sins” are, first, women’s alleged tendency towards insubordination and, second, their purported (and presumed impure) corporeality. Here, I argue that patriarchal concerns with female insubordination and sexuality/embodiment coordinate directly with the Christian tradition’s emphasis on female submission and “modesty.”

It should come as no surprise that these concerns have a long legacy in the West, dating back to the emergence of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the book of Genesis, particularly chapters two and three, Eve, the prototypical woman, is painted as radically insubordinate (a sin that leaves her and all subsequent women charged with the fall of humanity) and exceedingly carnal. The story of Genesis remains central to the cosmological understanding of many in the contemporary West and as such continues to inform the Western construction of gendered hierarchies; indeed, according to the late feminist theologian Mary Daly, “The foundation upon which the case for the subordination of woman is built lies in the older of the two accounts of creation” (Daly 77). The creation account to which Daly refers here is the J document account, found in Genesis 2 of the Hebrew Bible. This version posits that the prototypical woman, Eve, was created out of and named by the prototypical man, Adam, in order that he might have a helpmeet.⁵ This account stands in direct contrast to the later (P document) account, found in Genesis 1, which describes God’s creation of woman and man as simultaneous and therefore egalitarian. Remarkably (or perhaps not?), it is the earlier and more problematic J document that most informs the Judeo-Christian tradition and its ideology concerning women. Thus, according to Daly, “In Genesis the [Church] Fathers found an ‘explanation’ of woman’s inferiority which served as a guarantee of divine approval for perpetuating the situation which made her inferior” (86).

The identification of women with sex, temptation, and the body rose out of Genesis as well. Chapter three narrates the story of the

fall, wherein Eve and Adam eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. This tale is often interpreted as evidence of women's obsession with the sexual temptation of man away from his God-given purity. "In the mentality of the Fathers, explains Daly, "woman and sexuality were identified. Their horror of sex was also a horror of woman" (88).

Of course, the legacy of this biblical apologetic for the patriarchal oppression of the female sex did not end with the patristic tradition. The rhetoric and practice of women's submission remains prominent in contemporary Christianity, especially in conservative evangelical communities, which often understand biblical passages prescribing gendered subjugation and/or difference to be the true, inerrant word of God. This, in turn, has resulted in the historical Christian emphasis upon women's "twin sins" of insubordination and corporeality.

Other feminist scholars have followed Daly in the analysis of the "twin sins," seeking to show how this construct still informs the lives of women and girls today.⁶ Griffith, for example, picks up on this in her *Born Again Bodies*, in which she notes that evangelical girls may struggle more with their bodies than their non-religious peers. "The pressure to be thin and beautiful," Griffith suggests,

may be even greater for teens in the devotional world for the same reasons it is so considerable among their older female counterparts: the duty to serve as a glowing witness to Christ's transformative power. Straddling the norms of "secular" youth culture and the intense bodily disciplines of American Protestantism, Christian teens are crushingly preoccupied with bodily control as with the many symbolizations of embodiment that aid them in signaling spiritual intensity and authenticity. (245)

The fashion and beauty ministries I investigated certainly reflect this complication: in both denying worldly interests (including the pursuit of mainstream beauty ideals) and reflecting trends and values of the mainstream media industries, these ministries simultaneously complicate and propagate the damaging and commodifying effects of corporate media upon teen girls. Researchers interested in evangelical girls' stories must therefore grapple with the complicated interplay of

evangelical fashion and beauty productions and the larger corporate/cultural promotion of femininity. This necessarily requires an investigation of the ways in which the contemporary United States – both secular and religious – can be understood as a commodity-driven, media-based culture.

Over the past several decades, girls' and cultural studies scholars have produced theoretical approaches that aid in this investigation. Girls' studies scholar Anita Harris, for example, claims that market-based forces of fragmentation and decollectivization characterize late modernity, thus making consumption a primary means through which youth express their individuality and craft their respective identities in our postmodern kaleidoscope culture (Harris 1). This sort of cultural fragmentation, in turn, lends itself to the emergence of what cultural studies scholar Douglas Kellner calls a "media culture," wherein

images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities. Radio, television, film, and other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of "us" and "them." (8)

Kellner's analysis is useful as we begin to consider the influence of mainstream media upon evangelical fashion and beauty ministries and the girls who participate in them. As we'll see, the hegemonic standards of beauty defined by the corporate mass media and informed by historical Christianity figure heavily in these ministries, thus contributing to girls' processes of identity construction in a real way. Moreover, the merging of these realms has myriad implications for evangelical culture, not the least of which is the potential for simultaneous commodification of girls' bodies and religious traditions. This is clear, for example, in Braendel's intention to make the (modest) display of female bodies the main spectacle of her events, an impulse that is also characteristic of the mainstream beauty and fashion industry. The joining of religion with consumerism is evident, as well, especially in Garrett's *Queen Esther's*

Secrets of Womanhood, which entreats mothers to commune religiously with their daughters over pedicures and shopping trips. Finally, the price of Braendel's and Garrett's productions and their involvement in the evangelical marketplace marks them as distinctively consumeristic.⁷

These commodifying impulses pervade contemporary evangelical culture, which today employs a diverse array of media motifs in an effort to spread the "good word." The breadth and popularity of the evangelical marketplace can be interpreted as "profane" on some level, but its ubiquity also reflects the result of conservative Christian efforts to combat what many see as the "secularizing efforts" of mainstream media. In her study of media use among conservative evangelicals, scholar Heather Hendershot notes that evangelical consumers often "use Christian media not as tools of salvation but as safeguards against secular contamination" (8). The embrace of media tools is, moreover, nothing new; according to Hendershot, evangelicals "have historically 'embraced – although often not without debate – any 'modern' means that could be used to spread the Gospel" (4).

In addition, the Christian embrace of materiality is not limited to the post-WWII evangelical sphere. The Christian employment of material accoutrements, including clothing and beauty products, has a long and rich history in Western religion that should not be ignored by contemporary scholars. In her study of material culture in the Christian West, scholar Colleen McDannell explains, "the assumption that true Christian sentiments can be, must be, set apart from the profane cannot be upheld when we look at how people use material culture in their religious lives...If we immediately assume that whenever money is exchanged religion is debased, then we will miss the subtle ways that people create and maintain spiritual ideals through the exchange of goods and the construction of spaces" (6).

With this in mind, the importance of materiality to contemporary evangelical fashion and beauty ministries cannot be understated. I'll attempt to weave a discussion of the influence of mainstream media and commodification throughout this article. Let's begin by looking at the first of women's "twin sins": insubordination.

Female Subordination in the Evangelical Tradition

In her introduction to *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, Griffith reminds readers that gender relations in

the evangelical tradition are far too complicated to be delineated simply in terms of “male ‘patriarchy’ and female ‘oppression’”; According to Griffith, “the realities are far more muddled...women have always carved out spaces for themselves within the social, historical, cultural, and religious structures that constrain them and have resisted those structures in subtle and unexpected ways” (*God’s Daughters* 14) Women’s and girls’ creative subversion of the gendered limitations and norms upheld by their faith communities was certainly evident in the ministries I investigated. Moreover, my studies make clear that the female leaders of these ministries are not only concerned with protecting girls’ “purity” and guarding them from the ills of secular culture, but they also have a genuine interest in promoting girls’ self-esteem and well-being.

In fact, the evangelical women I spoke with feel passionately about helping girls negotiate the potentially harmful messages transmitted through mainstream media and teenage peer groups. Braendel and Garrett both stressed the need for grown women of faith to mentor contemporary girls throughout this difficult process. Garrett, especially, spoke to the importance of gender-specific spaces and communities for girls’ (and women’s) empowerment and well-being.

These concepts and their delivery might be understood as a shift away from traditional evangelical belief and practice, which has historically emphasized men’s voices and experiences, promoted normative gender roles, and – perhaps most significantly for this study – only rarely been delivered by a female speaker to a large, exclusively female audience, as is the case with Braendel’s ministry in particular. It is indeed a significant point that these paradoxical messages of submission and resistance are being disseminated to Christian girls largely through the works of the evangelical woman entrepreneurs I interviewed and others like them. The rising prominence and popularity of ministries such as these might even be interpreted as a challenge to conservative Christianity’s androcentric, male-dominated legacy.

Before I begin to make conjectures to that end, however, I must note: Female speakers’ adherence to traditional notions of femininity and patriarchal oppression should not be understated; in fact, they figure prominently in Braendel’s and Garrett’s work and were evident in each

of my interviews with teenage girls. Braendel's and Garrett's messages, for example, were often paradoxical: both spoke to the import of female self-sacrifice and submission just as they called for girls to resist constructions of hegemonic femininity by practicing self respect. Moreover, their emphasis upon women's role as spiritual mentors to young children has roots in historical Christian conceptualizations of womanhood. According to McDannell, Christian women since the 19th century have been considered the premier purveyors of spiritual truth to younger generations, especially in the domestic sphere:

The cult of True Womanhood promoted the association between domesticity and Christianity to the extent that mothers were considered to hold the key to the salvation of their children...Ministers, writers, artists, and reformers [in the 19th century] created a parallel between the Madonna nursing the divine child Jesus and the human mother feeding her child the words of salvation. (80)

For conservative Christians, of course, the salvific power of the feminine never moved beyond the borders of the domesticity. Moreover, women's spiritual guidance remains unwelcome to men, who are still presumed to possess greater spiritual truths by virtue of their gender.

These biases have become more formalized since the emergence of the cult of True Womanhood in the 1800s. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention – currently the largest evangelical Protestant denomination in the United States – has since 1980 foregrounded women's subjugation to men in its official resolutions, claiming that patriarchal order is biblically mandated (Association of Religion Data Archives)⁸. Not surprisingly, both Braendel and Garrett attend megachurches heavily influenced by Southern Baptist doctrine and use Southern Baptist publishers and media outlets to distribute their messages. The patriarchal bent of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Christian tradition more generally is therefore reflected in their work.

The most egregious example of the influence of Christian patriarchy on their work lies in Braendel's inclusion of a videotaped interview with four teenage boys in her "Modest is Hottest" fashion

show ministry. In this video, the four boys discuss in detail what they consider to be the most desirable manner of dress, amount of makeup, behavior, and belief system for girls. Braendel credits this video with distinguishing her event from other youth ministries and with truly selling the importance of modesty to the teenage girls in her audience. During our interview, she explained,

I make these videos because I want the girls to see what Christian guys really think about the way they dress... And you know what? I could probably show that video and go home! The conference could be over; I have done my job. Because all of a sudden girls hear [about modesty] not from a youth director, not from their pastor, not even from their speaker, but from guys their own age, who are really cute, who these girls think they're getting dressed up for and going to the mall. And [the girls] are going, 'Oh my goodness. These guys see me completely different than the way I wanted to represent myself.' It has been very, very powerful at the events.

The featured "Christian guys" are all white and presumably middle- to upper-middle-class, and each is adorned in a monochromatic polo shirt, sporting the requisite tan of a certifiable Caucasian hottie. In neutral accents and without affect, each of these "really cute" boys re-describe the conservative evangelical consensus on proper womanhood, thereby prescribing traditional standards of behavior and appearance to the girls across the United States through Braendel's speaking events.

In keeping with Braendel's theme, the speakers heavily emphasize the appeal of female modesty. According to one of the interviewees, "When you see a girl who's dressed modest, you're kind of drawn to that person...It's definitely a lot better" (qtd. in Braendel, "What Guys Really Think"). This contention that modesty is "better" and more attractive pressures girls into self-policing their behavior and appearance to attract "cute" Christian boys such as these. Moreover, Braendel's video stresses heteronormative relational patterns and feminine domesticity, as her interviewees agree that they would not want to select an immodest girl for their wife lest they be surprised by the way she "actually" looks. According to one sandy-haired fellow,

I need to see my girl in a natural state. Eventually, we're gonna get married, and we're gonna have to see our wives without

makeup, and for me, I don't wanna see that to be a shock [laughs]. I wanna know what my wife's gonna look like in a natural state, without any makeup on, so really, I say no makeup at all. (qtd. in Braendel, "What Guys Really Think")

Braendel seems to think that the inclusion of these videos is beneficial for girls as they illustrate that they need not be dolled up to "get" a man or to impress a boy at the mall. Unfortunately, these videos privilege boys' voices and experiences over girls', thereby contributing to the very problem of girls' self-denigration and compliance with male-defined beauty standards that Braendel claims to reject. Their inclusion, moreover, speaks directly to evangelical Christianity's failure to provide systematic analysis of oppression and injustice; rather than encouraging girls to forge their own way and reject beauty standards *because they are hurtful and unrealistic*, Braendel insists that girls dress "differently" from mainstream women so as to please conventionally attractive Christian men.

Thus, women's voices and experiences are thwarted once again by the fantasies of white men, and the projected images of anonymous, teenage white men at that. Interestingly, the white men in this video are the tools of an older woman; while the video is certainly problematic, no one can fault its characters for their honesty. In other words, it is, oddly, Braendel herself, not the four young men in her video, who wields patriarchal power over the teenage girls who attend her fashion events. This curious circumstance and the equally curious power of these videos demand more attention, and I will return to them in the next section, which focuses on women's corporeality and the male gaze. First, I'd like to delve deeper into the rhetoric of women's submission in the evangelical fashion and beauty industry, specifically as it surfaces in the work of author Ginger Garrett.

In Garrett's *Queen Esther's Secrets of Womanhood: A Biblical Rite of Passage for Your Daughter*, the import of women's and girls' self-sacrifice in the evangelical tradition comes into clear focus. Garrett wrote this book specifically for evangelical mothers, intending to provide "a blueprint for a whole year's worth of activities" through which they can bond with their daughters (back cover). In this hybrid self-help guide/Bible study workbook, Garrett instructs Christian mothers how best to raise and relate to their fledgling adolescent girls, thus recalling

McDannell's contention that mothers are have historically been considered to "hold the key to the salvation of their children" (80). *Queen Esther's Secrets of Womanhood* is fittingly based around the story of Esther, a biblical woman (or girl, really – most agree she was about twelve in the story) who allegedly led the Jews to freedom by gaining the affection of Xerxes I, king of Persia. Garrett believes Esther held a great deal of power, and speaks to this throughout her book. According to Garrett, however, this power lay not in Esther's intellect or physical strength, but rather in her commitment to sacrificial love. Garrett claims,

Esther loved. She loved a king by submitting to him although he might not accept her nationality. She loved Mordecai by submitting to his authority. She loved her people by trying to save them...Esther is one of the most celebrated women in history, but she made great sacrifices. If she had fought against any one of those circumstances, she probably would have lost her place in God's purpose. (102)

Thus, for Garrett, Esther's motivation toward self-sacrifice in the face of more powerful men was her saving grace, and, somewhat ironically, her most powerful attribute. This contention constitutes a theme in Garrett's book, and she speaks to it often. It would be disingenuous to paint this as Garrett's overarching point, however; in fact, despite Garrett's celebration of women's self-sacrificial "nature" (apparently, for Garrett, sacrifice and subjugation are innate features of the female sex), her real commitment in her books and her speaking events is to the importance of women's and girls' friendship and community.

Problematizing Submission through Women's Solidarity

"A Harvard nurses' study came out with a finding not too long ago that adult women who have deep connections with other women cut their risk of death over a nine year period by sixty percent," Garrett explained to me in a telephone interview. "So it can actually negatively affect our physical health when we engage in any social ritual, whether it's comparing or gossiping, that breaks our connection with other girls." Garrett's belief in the importance of women's community undergirds all of her work, including the two books investigated as part of this study. It was, in fact, her primary motivation towards writing. In the same interview, Garrett told me,

I got my start writing when I was a newlywed, and my husband and I were going through a long season of infertility and miscarriages. I couldn't find anything either at the Christian bookstores or secular bookstores that provided any comfort... That whole experience was a pivotal spiritual and professional turning point because I had really spent a lot of time in my own cocoon of comfort, and going through that long period of suffering, I realized that it's really just the way of the world, and I wanted to find ways to comfort other women. So I got into writing as a way of reaching out to other women.

While Garrett's interest in the promotion of evangelical women's solidarity may strike some secular readers as distinctively feminist and therefore somewhat out of place, it is a familiar theme for many conservative Christian women. Recall Griffith, whose study of evangelical women's ministries revealed that these organizations are often a main source of support for their members. According to Griffith, many evangelical women "have intentionally forged alternative communities that claim to provide not only (or even primarily) theological or doctrinal instruction but loving nurturance, diagnosis of women's particular ills, and guaranteed treatment" (*God's Daughters* 20). Here, Griffith refers specifically to women's Aglow ministries, which were the focus of her ethnography; in recent years, however, a number of other feminist ethnographers have shown that this trend exists throughout the woman-specific spaces in the evangelical milieu.

For example, scholar Brenda Brasher claims that one of the most critical findings of her recent ethnography of evangelical fundamentalist women was that women consistently form all-female groups within fundamentalist congregations that run parallel to mixed-sex congregational activities. These ministries form social networks among women that provide them with a valuable source of religious alterity and institutional power. For when fundamentalist women want to exercise power, want to change their congregation in any way, these groups provide them with an organizational base from which to operate.

One of the primary ways in which these woman-only alliances manifest is through "congregational women's ministry programs," which Brasher claims "create and sustain a special symbolic world,

parallel to the general one but empowering to fundamentalist women” (5). These symbolic worlds, moreover, “encourage the development of female enclaves, intimate social networks of women that also empower women by functioning as a material and spiritual resource for female fundamentalists in distress” (5). These symbolic worlds may also be formed outside of the traditional congregational format, as is the case with Braendel’s speaking events.

Braendel’s “Modest is Hottest” fashion shows, in particular, indicate the ways in which fashion and beauty ministries for evangelical girls can help form, however momentarily, the gynocentric, supportive female enclaves Brasher references. Since Braendel operates in the evangelical sphere, her events are almost always gender-specific; this is due mostly to the patriarchal nature and structure of conservative Christianity, which generally disallows women’s ministering to mixed-gender audiences. Braendel’s role as head lecturer, however, subverts the conservative gender norms that so heavily inform contemporary evangelical women’s lives. Thus, Braendel’s events are important examples of evangelical women’s creative leveraging of power. As feminist scholar Alyson Jule suggests, “students within an evangelical subculture are encouraged to perform gender so that masculine behavior is connected to public displays of influence and so that feminine behavior is connected with intimate, more private displays. Men are rehearsed into the role of performer; women are rehearsed into the role of silent audience member” (44). Braendel’s speaking events and Garrett’s books provide girls with the rare opportunity to receive sacred and spiritual truths from a female authority, thereby illustrating that evangelical women can, and often do, engage in “public displays of influence.”

Moreover, while the forced segregation of Braendel’s events certainly points to the inequalities that pervade contemporary evangelical culture, the physical absence of men and boys is instrumental in creating a space where girls feel safe sharing their emotions and ideas. Braendel considers this comfortable atmosphere of mutual acceptance essential to the efficacy of her events, during which she often asks participants to self-disclose during deeply emotional rituals. For example, Braendel explained during our interview,

After I share the gospel at my teen events, I have the girls write

down on a postcard what they're gonna change about their lives or what they're going to commit to...A lot of girls write down it's cutting that they're giving up, anorexia, overeating, alcoholism, drugs, some are addicted to sex at this age, and you know, they're teenagers! Sometimes we hold a mirror over a trash can, and girls bring their cards up and they smash 'em with a hammer. It's very powerful.

The power of this communal catharsis was not lost on the girls I spoke with. 15-year-old Caroline Bain, for example, told me during a telephone interview that "all girls should go to Shari's events" because they "really impact you." Even more, she informed me that she and her peers leave Braendel's "Modest is Hottest" speaking events "really loving how...we think about ourselves, because we have so much more confidence with who we are." Bain's emphatic endorsement of Braendel's ministry indicates, at the very least, that these events have bolstered her self-esteem, helping her navigate the difficulties inherent to "growing up girl" in the contemporary West.

In short, the evangelical fashion and beauty ministries I investigated seemed to provide girls with a safe space in which they could begin constructing a sense of self. These ministries also, however, reinscribe constraining notions of femininity and womanhood, including doctrines of women's self-sacrifice and submission. These seemingly disparate messages demonstrate the struggle between the traditional patriarchal structure that undergirds conservative evangelical Christianity on the one hand and the acute power of women's experiences and communal identity on the other.

Corporality in the Christian Tradition

In addition to the themes of self-sacrifice and submission, one of the key motifs in these ministries was the equation of the female sex with corporeality, the second of the "twin sins." The investigation of contemporary evangelical treatment of the body can help us better understand the evangelical tradition as a whole, for, as McDannell points out, "The dualism that associates the sacred with religion and the body with secular concerns inadequately describes how Christians have used the body as the primary mediator to express and appropriate religious experiences" (267). This is certainly true for the fashion and

beauty ministries in question. Thus, beginning with a short history of women's corporeality in the Christian tradition, I will investigate the treatment of teen girls' embodiment in modern evangelism.

Much like the doctrine of women's submission, the cultural construction of women as body has a long and arduous history in Western culture. The centrality of this misogynistic construction to the patriarchal worldview of the ancient Israelites is evident throughout Judeo-Christian texts and has been the subject of many a feminist treatise concerning the condition of woman in the historical and contemporary West. Most agree that the fabricated link connecting woman and nature/the body helped form the basis for the subjugation and exploitation of women in the Judeo-Christian tradition discussed above. Christian feminist Elizabeth Powell articulates this relationship well when she writes,

the body belongs to the fallen world and causes the human spirit to continually be tempted back into sin. Women have historically paid a heavy price for the inculcation of these antibody structures as female selves are aligned with the devalued body while male selves are freer to inhabit the spiritual world. Implications for women have been, for example, carrying the responsibility and shame for men's struggles with lust, or suppressing their rich variety of gifts within the circumscription of patriarchal definitions of the maternal role. (103-04)

The reduction of woman to base corporeality has been no small problem for the female sex; in addition to encouraging the general subjugation of women to men, the understanding of *woman as body* translates directly into the overt denigration of the female self and therefore contributes to the culture of shame and silence surrounding women and their experiences – corporal, intellectual, or otherwise. The effects of equating women with base corporality are abundantly clear in contemporary Western culture, wherein female victims of violent sexual assault are still told, time and again, that their particular state of embodiment compelled their assailant to attack. The common evangelical charge that girls and women are at fault when subjected to the “unwanted attention” or lust of men (which, both Braendel and Garrett argue, is innate to male biology) is a necessary building block

toward the cultural acceptance of these rape apologetics. Today, men are consistently painted as people with “needs” and uncontrollable sexual urges, while women, by contrast, are expected to be pure and virginal, burdened with the task of deflecting lusty men. Further complicating women’s impossible positionality is the paradoxical cultural assumption that women are inherently carnal: according to this tropism, people with vaginas, while not necessarily sexual themselves, are inherently at fault for the sexual temptation of men away from their innate spiritual purity.

This convoluted rhetoric has resulted in exceedingly complicated rules, regulations, and conceptualizations of the female body in contemporary evangelism. Indeed, despite (or perhaps due to) evangelicals’ often vehement opposition to women’s bodily displays and sexual autonomy, the objectification of the female body in evangelical Christian ministries and media is widespread. Evidence of the identification of women with base corporeality pervaded my primary sources, cropping up in each interview conducted, book read, article perused. In these sources, however, women’s corporeality is not “celebrated” (read: exploited) in quite the same ways it is in contemporary secular culture; rather than using women’s flesh to sell products or boost ratings, evangelical texts objectify women’s bodies as significant sources of temptation that require careful oversight and control. Braendel, for example, has five clearly defined rules that she claims will safeguard girls against appearing immodest. These rules are important, she told me, because even when girls don’t mean to dress “provocatively” they often “actually cause their guy friends to sin.” Her rules include prohibitions as these (drawn from our interview):

1. No bra straps should ever be showing . . . And I don’t care if they’re plastic, yellow, red, purple, whatever, clear: nuh-uh. That’s still a bra strap.
2. No bust exposure. That means no cleavage, I don’t care how busty you are . . . It also means wearing shirts that don’t have sayings plastered across your boobs, because sometimes that draws attention to someone.
3. No bellies . . . Bellies are not for your regular everyday clothes...

When you have your belly showing, you know, guys find bellies very sexy. And guys' brains are not wired the way girls' brains are. So when a guy looks at you, he thinks things that you really don't want him to think.

4. No bottom exposure. I don't wanna see words written across your rear end, and I also don't wanna see short skirts or shorts.

5. No "bubbling," and that's a term I invented for when your clothes are too tight and they cling to your body . . . That's no good.

Clearly, then, both "evangelical" and "secular" treatments of women's bodies amount to discipline and regulation; the evangelical approach is simply more overt. The systematic regulation of women's bodies – whatever form it takes – is, however, nothing new. "Viewed historically," explains feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, "the discipline and normalization of the female body . . . has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control" (166). This came into clear focus in my interview with author Ginger Garrett, whose Christian evangelical books often target teen girls and deal specifically with issues of beauty and embodiment. When I asked Garrett to describe for me "true beauty," she relayed an interpretation of Exodus 38:8, which references women's sacrifice of their mirrors to God during the building of the Tabernacle. According to Garrett,

The Bible teaches that Egypt was a land of enslavement, and the men would make bricks and be treated like animals. And so the women would be at home, you know, taking care of the kids and all that. The women had a pact between themselves, that they would make themselves beautiful. So when their husbands came home, after a day of slavery and humiliation, without even having to say a word, the women were automatically communicating through their appearance that 'You are worthy, and are honored, and I'm going to give you my best.' So when God led them out that period of enslavement and humiliation the women donated their mirrors to the tabernacle as a way of worshipping what God had done through them and through their beauty.

Garrett's interpretation of this scripture is interesting in that it

gestures to the Judeo-Christian tradition's long legacy of objectifying images of women's bodies. Like modern secular and religious media, this story reduces women to their base corporality by suggesting that their "greatest gift" to God (in other words, their most valuable attribute) is their material beauty. This objectification functions as a form of control because it denies their value in other, more active arenas (craftsmanship, temple construction, speaking, et cetera), leaving them to rely entirely upon their physicality for power and redemption. Finally, Garrett's interpretation proposes that the objectification of the female body serves to advance not the lives or feelings or self-worth of the women themselves, but rather the lives and self-worth of men, their *de facto* (and historically *de jure*) owners.

As if to confirm this point, Garrett goes on to claim that beauty is *predicated* upon self-loss and lack of agency. According to Garrett, "the moral of the story is that beauty, in the biblical definition, isn't about what we can get for ourselves, acceptance or love; the biblical definition of beauty is always keeping an eye out for how we can serve others with everything God has given us" (Personal interview). Garrett's understanding of "true" beauty as self-sacrificial makes sense given the Christian emphasis on service and humility, but it is still another example of a belief that has been complicated by the interplay of patriarchal evangelical and secular cultures. The definition of beauty as necessarily self-sacrificial gains additional meaning given its placement within a larger, hyper-mediated and misogynistic Western culture, wherein women's beauty is *never* their own. Just like the Israelite women in Exodus 38:8, women today are socialized to perform their beauty exclusively for men.

Garrett's interpretation, therefore, speaks not only to the patriarchal nature of the conservative Christian church, but also to the centrality of what scholar Laura Mulvey calls the "patriarchal male gaze" in the control and maintenance of women's bodies in the secular West. Explains Mulvey,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their

appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (33)

This phenomenon might well be influenced by the historical Christian emphasis on women's embodiment. Regardless, the patriarchal male gaze is prominent throughout Western culture and was thus implicated by each of my primary sources.

15-year-old evangelical Bain, for example, made clear the importance of the patriarchal male gaze to her own beauty-related decisions during our telephone interview. Upon learning through one of Braendel's ministries that "guys say 'Less makeup,'" Bain drastically reduced the amount of eye makeup she applied each morning. In her words, "Most girls think that guys like more makeup and that we, you know, should pile on the makeup, cover up our skin, and I guess that's what I thought. But when I saw all of those guys [in Braendel's video testimonials] saying 'Less makeup, you wear too much of that eye stuff,' it really made me think." Learning about the specific preferences of four teen boys she had never met had a definite impact on Bain's presentation and understanding of herself; according to Bain, the video testimonial not only changed the way she wore her makeup, but also caused a shift in her "self-perception of how girls are supposed to be" (Personal interview).

Another powerful example of contemporary evangelical Christianity's treatment of girls' corporeality and the power of the male gaze surfaces in the pages of *Campus Life*, a Christian magazine for teens. The article, titled "What's Wrong with Wearing This?" considers issues of modesty with a particular focus on "What Guys Really Want." In an "Open Letter to Girls" published at the end of the piece, the male members of popular evangelical rock band Superchic[k] write,

I'm sure most of you have figured out that the sexier you dress, the more attention you get. But even though the attention can feel good, it's really not good for you. Everyone deserves to be loved, not lusted over. When you dress to impress, guys notice, but when you try to live a life that's honoring Christ, a whole different set of guys notice. You just can't tell, cause they're not trying to look you up and down. Instead of thinking about you with no clothes on, they're thinking about you in

your wedding dress. Instead of thinking about one night of sex, they're thinking about what it would be like to grow old with you. Instead of wondering if you're a cheap date, they wonder if you're gonna be a good mom.

So if you're feeling left out because you don't show off your body, don't date yet, or if you're thinking about taking it a little easier on us guys by dressing a touch more conservatively, I promise you're going to get noticed. In fact, I can name at least five skateboarding, guitar playing, skydiving, motorcycle riding, snowboarding, rock climbing guys in this band who are going to think you're the bomb. (Penney 13)

In just two paragraphs, then, the boys of Superchic[k] manage to touch on a number of cultural tropes concerning gendered norms and the social control of women's bodies in the contemporary West. First, they reinforce the idea that evangelical girls are at fault for unwanted or misguided male attention, not the other way around. They echo several cultural ideals regarding femininity, as well, seamlessly reproducing the image of the "perfect Christian woman," who is well-schooled in domesticity and, as such, has lofty aspirations including (and potentially limited to) the lifelong practice of self-sacrificial motherhood. Moreover, they reinforce the gender binary that constructs men and masculinity as active ("skateboarding, guitar playing, skydiving...") and women and femininity as passive – objects that men can, alternatively, utilize as sperm depositories (but only for "one night"!) or marry to bear and nourish their progeny.

Still, while aspects of the evangelical fashion and beauty culture clearly reproduce gender and body norms that could be harmful and constraining for our girls, Braendel's and Garrett's messages also bolster girls' confidence in a way that mainstream culture does not. In fact, their ministries often promoted girls' autonomy and self-love. This is clear, for example, in a quotation from Braendel which I borrowed for this article's title: "My whole goal at the events," she stated, "is to help girls know that they are beautiful exactly as they are. We all have challenges – maybe you feel like you're a little fluffy [i.e., fat], or your nose is different from everyone else's – but whatever it is, I tell my girls to look in the mirror and say, "Thank you God for making me cute!"

Because He did make everyone cute” (Personal interview). Braendel demonstrates the ambiguous relationship between mainstream beauty norms and evangelical fashion and beauty culture for teen girls: while she does reinscribe traditional notions of femininity by foregrounding women’s beauty as preeminently important and suggesting that a certain weight or nose shape are most desirable, her underlying message reaffirms girls’ innate beauty and originality. The next section explores this complex relationship, focusing on the positive body messages present in these productions and the ways in which girls use them to self-affirming ends.

Positive Body Messages in Fashion and Beauty Ministries

It is significant, first of all, to note recent shifts in evangelical fashion and beauty productions for teen girls. Case in point: Griffith’s recent book-length study on embodiment in American Christianity focused on the central role of weight loss and fasting, a trend that continued right through the 1990s. Interestingly, however, none of the ministries I investigated so much as mentioned that girls should lose weight; on the contrary, they seemed to embrace a number of body types, encouraging girls to thank God for making them “cute” no matter what their “challenge.” This marks a significant departure from the focus of the evangelical fashion and beauty industry of the late 20th century which, Griffith notes, was “notably rigorous in its steady focus on extreme slenderness” (*Born Again Bodies* 219) punctuated by the insistence, “Yes, God wants you to be thin and yes, you can change your lifestyle to lose weight!” (*Born Again Bodies* 186) This shift indicates, at the very least, that Braendel and Garrett are interested in a more fluid definition of teen evangelical “beauty” than their predecessors. My interviews with the evangelical entrepreneurs support this interpretation.

One particularly heartwarming example came near the end of my interview with Braendel, when I asked her to explain true beauty. “I hope that after the event, they understand that real beauty is them,” she told me, continuing,

With all their stuff, with all the fights they have with their brothers and sisters, with the parents that maybe aren’t so nice to them, with the sex they’ve already been having, with everything

they bring in, [I hope they still know] that true beauty is God, and that He lives in us. And that we are made in his image, and that He completely forgives us for everything we've done, and that when they walk out those doors, when they commit to being a true committed Christian, that's real beauty.

In this explanation of true beauty, Braendel challenges patriarchal notions of women's bodily inferiority. To her mind, women, also, are "made in His image." Braendel thus speaks to the innate beauty of girls, which lies more in their spirit than in their physicality.

My interviews with evangelical girls did even more to challenge these notions. Yet another transgressive and heartwarming description of true beauty came from 15-year-old Leanne MacIntyre. When asked if she could think of an example of a "truly beautiful" person, MacIntyre responded,

Well, I could say one person, and that's my brother's boyfriend. Here are the reasons why I think he's truly beautiful and pretty: He has a high forehead, his brow bone is nice. He has jet-black hair, and he's tan naturally. He's smart, he's nice, and he gets along with everybody.

In sum, she told me, her brother's boyfriend is "perfect in every way," the true image of beauty for this 15-year-old Southern evangelical girl. Her choice is especially transgressive because the man she describes is gay. Thus, MacIntyre not only combats the construction of beauty as necessarily feminine, but also resists evangelical constructions of inner beauty and spiritual purity. This, of course, could be the subject of a separate paper; suffice it to say, here, that evangelical girls clearly do not all adhere to the heteronormative standards prescribed by the culture(s) in which they are immersed.

Interviews with other evangelical girls revealed other forms of resistance to restrictive evangelical norms for teen girls' fashion, beauty, and sexuality. Indeed, while Bain's description of the importance of the male gaze to her self-image is not uncommon, my interviews with other evangelical girls reveal the diversity of opinion among evangelical girls in their responses to fashion and beauty ministries. For example, 15-year-old Josephine Wright, member of the vibrant evangelical

Young Life group, explained in her interview, “I think that purity has to do with your heart, not your actions or what you wear. I mean yeah, Jesus loving you does have to do with your actions, and some people see it as ‘No, no, you cannot do that,’ but at the same time He’ll always love you.” Clearly, the evangelical emphasis on Christ’s unqualified love has provided Wright with tools to negotiate the complicated and often paradoxical messages set forth in contemporary evangelical and secular culture. Moreover, in an overt display of resistance to evangelical constructions of femininity and “purity,” Wright told me, “Our ministers say girls should never dress like, too low-cut, too short, too scandalously, because they tell you that it makes boys sin. And I completely disagree with that, but that is what other people believe.” When prodded about whether or not issues of girls’ embodiment and modest dress were ever contentious or confusing for her, Wright was resolute in her autonomy, explaining that she ignores scriptures and sermons that she finds oppressive and focuses instead on more enlightening doctrine and her personal relationship with Jesus Christ. While the subversive nature of Wright’s message may not be embraced by all evangelical girls, her religious theory is broadly accepted. Emphasizing one’s personal relationship with Christ is, in fact, a defining characteristic of contemporary evangelical Protestantism. By justifying her resistance to the prohibitions of “our ministers” in this way, Carpenter embodies the subtle arts of subversion that girls adopt in the face of multiple oppressions.

In sum, while evidence of corporal and spiritual objectification and exploitation certainly abounds in evangelical fashion and beauty ministries for teen girls, it is irresponsible to claim this dynamic as their defining element. Denying the spiritual worth of these ministries effectively denies the spiritual autonomy of evangelical women and girls, who often find comfort in these ministries and who, moreover, frequently construct their own faith in resistance to mainstream and evangelical conceptions of femininity. Significantly, these ministries provide a gender-specific space for girls to begin constructing their identities. This is a powerful development in a culture informed by the intersecting patriarchal spheres of contemporary evangelism and misogynistic consumerism.

Most importantly, however, the girls that attend these ministries

are clearly creative, intelligent agents engaged in constructing religious and social identities in the midst of an oppressive and increasingly paradoxical “kaleidoscope” culture. This spiritual autonomy and sense of ambiguity was captured by Wright, who told me:

I believe in Jesus, I believe in God, and I believe in the savior but I don't agree with some of the teachings and I guess that makes me kind of, not necessarily hypocritical because it's my own beliefs, I mean, every person creates their own god. ..They might picture the same person but nobody speaks to him the same, nobody sees or hears or believes in the same god. And I believe that I've created my own god, not to go with what I want to have, but what I need.

By boldly disagreeing with some Church doctrine (“the teachings”) and constructing a personal god to meet her needs, Wright directly challenges many of the constraints set forth by the evangelical tradition. Her church, however, remains a safe space for her, a place where she can explore her burgeoning sense of self among other faithful adolescents. Like so many other girls, Wright straddles the divide between the evangelical and the secular, selectively appropriating that which is useful from both realms.

Notes

¹The Christian evangelical movement in the contemporary United States is sufficiently diverse to make the definitional task daunting, but a reasonable characterization can be found in the work of historian Randall Balmer, who describes evangelicals as all those who “insist on some sort of spiritual rebirth as a criterion for entering the kingdom of heaven, who often impose exacting behavioral standards on the faithful, and whose beliefs, institutions, and folkways comprise the evangelical subculture of America” (xii).

²For more on girls' studies, see Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber; Anita Harris; and Mary Celeste Kearney.

³See Julie Ingersoll, Christel Manning, R. Marie Griffith (1997 and 2004).

⁴I have changed the names of all three minors.

⁵The translation of the word “helpmeet” in Genesis 2 is the source of much controversy in feminist biblical scholarship but nevertheless greatly informs the ideology and practice of most contemporary Christians.

⁶ See Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune, Caroline Walker Bynum, R. Marie Griffith (1997 and 2004), and Margaret R Miles.

⁷ For example, tickets to Braendel’s speaking events run about \$25 per person; books by Garrett and Braendel cost roughly \$14 each; and Braendel’s “Teen Beauty Bootcamp” is \$895 per participant, per week (see sharibraendel.com).

⁸ For discussion on this topic, see Susan M Shaw.

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