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Producing High Priests and Princesses: The Father-Daughter Relationship in the Christian Sexual Purity Movement

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Abstract: This article describes and analyzes father-daughter purity balls in the context of the contemporary U.S. American conservative Christian sexual purity movement, with an emphasis on taking the self-understanding of those involved in the movement into account. It shows the ways that the idealization of a hierarchical father-daughter relationship both constructs and reflects sexual purity ideals. The Christian sexual purity teachings frame this father-daughter relationship as an essential part of forming the ideal subject, and as reflective of the right order of the kingdom of God. In the logic of sexual purity, a good man is the strong high-priest leader of the household and the ideal girl is princess-like: white, non-poor, attractive, pure, feminine, delicate, and receptive. She is preparing, under her father's guidance, for heterosexual marriage. Attention to the father-daughter relationship in the sexual purity movement highlights the ways that sexual purity is primarily about subject formation and the ordering of relationships—in families, in the nation, and in the church—and less about the specifics of when particular sexual acts take place or the public health risks that might come from those acts. This exploration also brings into relief the ways that contemporary conservative Christian sexual purity teachings draw from and build on two prominent aspects of contemporary U.S. American popular culture: the important role of the princess figure, and the buying of goods as indispensable to the formation of the subject.

Keywords: evangelical Christianity; sexual purity; sexual ethics; sexuality education; abstinence; chastity; virginity

1. Introduction

The notion of sexual purity is not new to Christianity, but the practices and rhetorics that have developed around the contemporary sexual purity movement over the last 30 years in the United States *are* new, and deserve further attention.¹ It is often assumed or implied that improved public health outcomes and the prevention of penile-vaginal intercourse² prior to heterosexual marriage

¹ In this study, the sexual purity movement is used to refer to the nexus of teachings, rhetorics, practices, and beliefs that include the promotion and construction not only of sexual purity, but also of abstinence, sexual risk avoidance, virginity, and chastity, since each of these terms mobilizes purity ideals.

² In most public health research, and in much of the sexual purity rhetoric, penile-vaginal intercourse is the central act to be monitored. Much of the peer-reviewed scientific literature uses the term “sexual initiation” or “sexual debut” to indicate the point at which someone first participates in penile-vaginal intercourse. In both academic and popular writing on sexuality, terms like “have sex” or “sexual intercourse” are understood to refer to penile-vaginal intercourse. This reinforces heteronormative notions of sex and sexuality and represents a small part of the sexual interaction that many people of all sexual orientations participate in and take pleasure from. The terminology used here is thus more specific than most of the literature in order to highlight the implicit heteronormativity and narrow framing of sexuality when “have sex” or “sexual intercourse” are used as shorthand for penile-vaginal intercourse.

are the primary functions of conservative Christian efforts to promote sexual purity, but this study demonstrates that this is not actually the case. A wide range of research shows that exposure to sexual purity teachings or making a sexual purity pledge has little impact on the age or rate at which adolescents engage in penile-vaginal intercourse [1–8]. In some contexts, promoters of sexual purity also acknowledge the extent to which the movement is not particularly concerned if such an approach “works” to improve public health outcomes or reduce the extent to which adolescents are “having sex”. Pamela Stenzel, a leading figure in the movement, articulates this well, speaking to a conservative Christian audience.

... Does it work? You know what? Doesn't matter. Cause guess what? My job is not to keep teenagers from having sex. The public schools' job is not to keep teens from having sex!...Our job should be to tell kids the truth! People of God can I beg you to commit yourself to truth, not what works! To truth! I don't care if it works, because at the end of the day, I'm not answering to you, I'm answering to God ([9], pp. 135–36)!

Against the backdrop of overwhelming evidence that sexual purity pledges and teachings do not meaningfully impact adolescents' sexual activity or improve public health outcomes [1–8], this study then asks what function the teachings and pledges serve. To what “truth” is the movement asking adherents to commit? While the aims and results of the movement are both complex and diverse, one of the central truths that the movement promotes is the importance of people living out a particular gender identity which is part of the ideal ordering of relationships. In short, the correct expression of gender leads to the correct ordering of relationships and thus the correct ordering of the Kingdom of God. The question is then to find a way to bring about this correct order. The curation of this ideal father-daughter relationship is a central part of this.

The work in this article builds on and contributes to the growing body of work at the intersection of sexual purity studies and the study of religion, including the important research done by Jessica Valenti, Breanne Fahs, Christine Gardner, and Sara Moslener. Valenti's popular 2009 book *The Purity Myth* [10] has been particularly influential in bringing the sexual purity movement and father-daughter purity balls to the attention of both the feminist and popular consciousness. Most significant for this study are those parts of her findings that uncover how the sexual purity rhetoric that invokes protection and respect for girls and women does not align with the on-the-ground realities within the movement where women and girls are often shamed and treated like property. Likewise, Breanne Fahs' 2010 article, “Daddy's Little Girls” [11], adds to Valenti's insights, pointing out the ways that the movement and purity balls normalize “control of women's bodies and women's sexuality through a variety of means: family, school, religion, and media messages” ([11], p. 137).

While the father-daughter relationship is often mentioned in sexual purity research, there has not yet been a study of the central role that the father-daughter relationship plays in the movement. Christine Gardner, author of *Making Chastity Sexy* [12], one of only two academic books on the sexual purity movement, notes that she intentionally excluded father-daughter purity balls from her book because they were a “scapegoat for our fears over sexual and religious conservatism” [13]. Although the claim that the very study of father-daughter purity balls makes them a scapegoat seems overblown, Gardner's comment raises an important point: scapegoating and caricature can inhibit a nuanced and deep understanding of the complex work that the sexual purity movement carries out. Intentionally or not, insightful feminist scholarship on the sexual purity movement, and father-daughter purity balls in particular, has sometime fallen prey to the temptation to make fun of or dismiss those who promote and take part in such religious activities. There has been minimal attention to the ways that those within the movement understand themselves and their religious practices and beliefs related to sexual purity. Sara Moslener's recent book, *Virgin Nation* [14], is an excellent example of research that has been successful in helping to render the movement legible to a primarily academic audience by articulating the historical and nationalistic context out of which the movement emerged. Yet, at the same time, she has also produced an account of religious practices and beliefs that its adherents would likely find foreign.

Thus, this study is intended to build on and draw from the important work that has already been done, but at the same time, take the movement's self-understanding more into account in the analysis.³ It is possible to take religious self-understanding seriously without mistaking it as the only legitimate interpretation. In taking into account the emphasis on the father-daughter relationship and the ways that those within the movement understand the religious work that they are doing, we see that those who both produce and consume sexual purity teachings are primarily focused on the ordering of relationships—in families, in the nation, and in the church. When particular sexual acts do or do not take place is not completely irrelevant, but it is important because of the function it is understood to play in identity formation and relational ordering.

2. Purity Balls and the Father-Daughter Relationship

The purchasing of a wide range of “purity products” by churches, parents, and young people is a central feature of the contemporary sexual purity movement. Examples, ranging in price from under \$10 to over \$300, include “purity princess survivor kits” [15], purity rings and other jewelry,⁴ “Don't Play With Fire” abstinence candles [19], “No Trespassing” underwear [19], or t-shirts with other catchy purity slogans [20].⁵ Purity events and rituals, often involving an admission fee or purchase, such as rallies [21], retreats [22], ring ceremonies [23], and purity parties [24,25], represent another important element in this contemporary movement. It is not an exaggeration to say that a sexual purity industry has developed—it focuses on producing products and events to both figuratively and literally sell sexual purity.⁶

The father-daughter purity ball is one ritual that has become increasingly popular in the last 10–15 years, and in many ways, the balls highlight central features of the movement overall. At many balls, the father's pledge identifies him as “the high priest of the household,”⁷ and if daughters make a pledge, it often involves a reference to giving herself as a gift to her husband on their wedding night.⁸ In addition to the obvious emphasis on the role of the father in the family and church (the “high priest”) and the female body as something that can be gifted to men, the balls highlight the extent to which sexual purity ideals are concerned with the production and maintenance of identities that can then fit into prescribed relational patterns.

The father-daughter purity ball was developed by Lisa and Randy Wilson, a conservative Christian couple in Colorado Springs, who have five daughters and two sons [29,30]. Following the first purity ball in the late 1990s, Lisa and Randy Wilson started an organization, Generations of Light, which promotes the purity balls and sells purity ball planning guides, along with other books and media

³ Toward the end of taking into account the self-understanding of those in the movement, this article relies on an extensive survey of the sexual purity literature produced on websites, in books, and in pamphlets from about 1995–2015, with an emphasis on literature produced from 2006–2011. Representative examples of this literature are included in the endnotes. This has been supplemented with about twenty-five semi-structured interviews with national and local leaders, parents, pastors, and adults who are currently or were formally involved in the sexual purity movement. No interviews or informal discussions were held with anyone under eighteen years of age. This article also benefits from visits to relevant major national organizations, smaller local organizations, churches, purity balls, and sexuality education trainings. Interviews and visits took place between 2013–2015 in Colorado Springs and Denver, Colorado; Dayton, Ohio; Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee; Orlando, Florida; Bowling Green, Kentucky; Washington D.C.; Boston, Massachusetts; Conway, Arkansas; and New York City, New York.

⁴ For more on the various jewelry that is central to many purity rituals see ([16], pp. 85–87; [17,18]).

⁵ Some websites used as sources are no longer available online. In this case, the archived link is used if available, and in most cases, an electronic image of the website is available upon request.

⁶ This is discussed at length in [12]. See also [26].

⁷ “I, [daughter's name]'s father, choose before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity. I will be pure in my own life as a man, husband and father. I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide and pray over my daughter and as the high priest in my home. This covering will be used by God to influence generations to come” [27].

⁸ As one example, see the suggested purity pledge in “Purity Ball Planner,” from the Abstinence Clearinghouse [28]: “With confidence in His power to strengthen me, I make a promise this day, to God, to you, to myself, and my future husband, and my future children to remain abstinent until the day I give myself as a wedding gift to my husband. I know that God requires this of me, that he loves me, and that he will reward me for my faithfulness in this life and the next.”

related to promoting sexual purity [31]. Although the balls began in Colorado Springs, they now take place across the United States. Various organizations sell guides [28], and many communities create balls based on what they have read, seen, and what seems like a good fit for their particular context. Since purity balls are locally initiated events and there is no systematic data collection on sexual purity activity in the United States, descriptions of what takes place at the “average” ball are imprecise.

Most balls share characteristics with proms, father-daughter dances, and weddings. There is often food served, and the fathers and daughters dance together. While there are some similarities to a wedding, there is little evidence to support the assertion that ball creators or attendees understand this as a pseudo-marriage between fathers and daughters ([11], pp. 118, 136, 138). The balls seem to be most frequently held in hotels or banquet facilities, but there are examples of balls held in churches and family homes. Often the balls are an annual event, with fathers and daughters attending together year after year. They can be sponsored by non-profit organizations, churches, and parachurch organizations. The balls appear to be most common in Protestant white communities that would be considered middle-class, though there are instances of balls held in other contexts. When purity balls are held in communities of color, the “father-daughter” aspect of the ball is often muted [32].

Leslee Unruh, founder of The Abstinence Clearinghouse [33], a well-known non-profit organization that promotes sexual purity, claimed that that approximately 1400 purity balls took place in 2006 [34] and that the number of yearly balls had grown to 4700 by 2008 [35]. It is unclear where the Clearinghouse gets these figures given that there is no mechanism in place to track such activity.⁹ Although exact numbers are impossible to state reliably, it is clear that thousands of purity balls have taken place across the U.S. in the past sixteen years, especially as they are increasingly popularized by media outlets as varied as *The Economist* [36], *The New York Times* [37], *Time* [38], *Good Morning America* [39], and the *Tyra Banks Show* [40].

Girls attending the balls typically wear formal dresses such as those that would be worn to a prom, but there are also examples of balls where all of the daughters wear white wedding-like dresses.¹⁰ Fathers wear tuxedos, nice suits, or formal military uniform. At most balls, mothers are requested not to attend. If the father cannot attend, a “significant male mentor” such as an uncle is often asked to attend in his place.¹¹ Some balls suggest that moms who want to be involved can do things like “decorate, serve the dinner, and participate in clean-up” [45]. Frequently, there are professional pictures and girls have their hair and/or make-up professionally done. There are examples of dads and daughters renting limousines to take them to and from the balls [34]. There is almost always a purity jewelry ritual, and the fathers and/or daughters each make pledges or vows [46]. Depending on the tradition, the daughter is given a purity ring or necklace; or she and the father exchange rings or some other piece of jewelry, such as a heart-shaped necklace with a keyhole (for the daughter), with an accompanying tie-tack in the shape of a key that the father wears (the key to his daughter’s heart).¹² In addition to father-daughter dancing, the daughters sometime perform a liturgical dance.

The father-daughter purity balls reflect the special status of the father-daughter relationship in sexual purity teachings. Fathers are framed as having a unique role in protecting the sexual purity of their adolescent daughters. Those who host and promote the balls often frame them as a “fun” way to affirm not only a father’s commitment and responsibility to protect his daughter’s sexual purity, but also a girl’s commitment to remain sexually pure until heterosexual marriage. While it is likely true that the balls are fun for many fathers and daughters, the rhetoric of fun also serves to obscure the theological and political work that balls do. In addition to being fun for some fathers

⁹ See [13] for further discussion of the number of purity balls that have taken place and concerns about Unruh’s figures.

¹⁰ There are a wide range of pictures available online. See especially David Mugnusson’s work on his homepage [41] and in his book [42]. As an example of the tradition of wearing wedding-like dresses, see [43].

¹¹ For example, The Christian Center Father-Daughter Purity Ball, Peoria, IL notes: “For those girls who have no father, we ask that a mentor escort her instead. This could be a grandfather, a family friend, an uncle, a pastor, or someone else who can serve as a godly male role model” [44].

¹² Such necklaces are widely available for purchase. See, for example, [47].

and daughters that take part in the ritual, the balls serve as a way for religious communities to state and publically affirm their theologies and accompanying practices related to sexual purity. Further, as the balls have become more well-known, they serve as a way for conservative Christian churches and organizations to promote and affirm their sexual purity teachings to national audiences. As this study demonstrates, the ideal father-daughter relationship that is produced through the balls helps to naturalize the father as the strong and protective head of the household, and the daughter as feminine, obedient, and princess-like.

One argument that is prevalent across feminist discussions of the sexual purity movement, and father-daughter purity balls in particular, is that the organizational leaders, pastors, parents, and professional purity educators have the intention to harm girls and young women. It is important to distinguish the analysis in this study from the prevailing analysis in much of the popular feminist analysis of father-daughter purity balls. As noted earlier, Valenti's work in *The Purity Myth* [10] has been particularly helpful in raising awareness of the theologies and practices of conservative Christian communities and in making connections to how these influences affect the popular ethos about women, girls, and their bodies. Yet, she and many other feminists writing on this topic often go beyond critical analysis to demean those who take part in promoting sexual purity ([10], pp. 68–69; [48,49]). Their critique is based on an understanding that those who promote sexual purity do so with the explicit intention to harm girls and women. Valenti argues that individuals and groups that make up and promote "the virginity movement" do not care about, and intend to oppress and harm, women and girls. "If the virginity movement cared about young women, the link to anti-feminism wouldn't be so evident" ([10], p. 57). In terms of an emphasis on intent, she states, "I like to call this movement the virginity movement. And it's a movement indeed—with conservatives and evangelical Christians at the helm, and our government, school systems and social institutions taking orders" ([10], p. 23). Thus, Valenti focuses on what she and other feminists see as an intentional movement to harm young women, with some people leading and giving orders to everyone else. She writes about the "goals" of the movement and assumes that it involves a relatively well-thought out plan: "It's genius, really. Shame women into being chaste and tell them that all they have to do to be 'good' is not to have sex" ([10], p. 24). While it is likely the case that there are individuals and groups that have ill intent and do not care about girls or women, the ten years of research on which this study is based has not yielded an indication of widespread intention to harm, and often quite the opposite. Thus, while not excluding purposeful harm or ill-intention from the movement completely, this study seeks a richer account of why churches, families, organizations, and political leaders might promote sexual purity and the hierarchical father-daughter relationship in the face of evidence that this does not bring about notable changes in the sexual or relational patterns of adolescents. If there is no ill-intention, it matters for how we both understand and address the results of sexual purity teachings.

3. Purity Pledges and the High Priest of the Household

A prominent part of the sexual purity rhetoric in the late 20th and early 21st century has focused on the use of pledges as a tool to reinforce commitments to the theologies and practices of sexual purity. True Love Waits (TLW) [50], one of the most well-known national sexual purity organizations, popularized the pledge-signing model where adolescents sign a pledge to remain sexually pure until heterosexual marriage. The original True Love Waits Pledge read: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, and my future mate to be sexually pure until the day I enter marriage" [51] and the most recent pledge reads: "In light of who God is, what Christ has done for me, and who I am in Him, from this day forward I commit myself to Him in the lifelong pursuit of purity. By His grace, I will continually present myself to Him as a living sacrifice,

holy and pleasing to God" [52]. Millions of U.S. teenagers have signed such pledges,¹³ and a wide range of practices, rituals, and products have been developed to inspire and encourage young people to make and keep such pledges.

In addition to the pledges that adolescents make, most father-daughter purity balls involve a pledge that the father makes. Although there is not a standard pledge used in all purity balls, the following pledge is commonly used and is promoted by the Wilsons' organization, Generations of Light:

I choose before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity. I will be pure in my own life as a man, husband and father. I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide and pray over my daughter and my family as the high priest in my home. This covering will be used by God to influence generations to come ([31]).

One helpful lens through which to understand the popularity of purity pledges is to see them as a reflection and assertion of a U.S. American understanding of the subject, where individual rationality and willpower provide the foundation for moral good. Theologian and ethicist Emilie Townes discusses this in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Construction of Evil*, where she notes that "a major part of who we are religiously in the U.S. stems from an Enlightenment conception of the self" ([55], p. 123). In this understanding, "each person is an independent unit that is an autonomous, self-determining ego" ([55], p. 123). In this vein, one of the central technologies of the sexual purity pledges is individual will and determination. In making this pledge, the pledgers reinforce to themselves and to their communities that it is fully within their power to live out the pledge. Thus, while adherents do sincerely hope that the pledge will inspire pledge-makers to act morally, a key function of the pledge is the production of an identity which helps bring about correctly ordered relationships.

This is reflected in the language of "choice" in the father's pledge ("I choose . . . "). There is no language about reliance on or relationship with God, nor is there any reference to religious community (which, in a Christian context, would most often be theologically understood as the body of Christ). The pledge is about what the individual pledge-maker will do. God is only relevant as a witness ("before God") to the pledge and in that God will use the actions of the pledge-maker "to influence future generations." Other people (children, spouse) are only significant insofar as they are under the care of the pledge-maker who is the high priest of his home.

In making the pledge, the pledge-maker and the community of pledge-makers construct a vision of a father's radical autonomy, growing out of and affirming the Enlightenment notion of self that Townes argues has deeply influenced religious identity in the United States. The pledge is not a static statement; it functions not only as a promise made by an individual man but also as a practice designed to build on, reinscribe, and affirm an ideology in the religious and political public sphere. Thus, as the maker of the pledge is identified as a man, husband, father, high priest, authority, and protector, these words shape the world in which the pledge is made. Likewise, when daughters are identified as in need of covering, protection, and authority, and the daughter and the broader family are identified as in need of guidance, leadership, prayer, and a high priest (all of which are embodied

¹³ In 2001, Peter Bearman and Hannah Brückner [1] put the number at 2.5 million, based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (NLSAH). They estimated that this represented 23% of female and 16% of male adolescents in the United States. Ronald Werner-Wilson estimated in 1998 that 16% of all college students in the U.S. took such a pledge [53]. Given the ongoing activity of organizations such as True Love Waits (TLW) in the years since the NLSAH, it is reasonable to assume that this number has increased substantially, although more recent figures are not readily available. On counting pledges, TLW states, "We have no way of knowing how many students have signed TLW commitment cards. The only numbers we can release with integrity are based on the cards we have collected for national/international displays and the number we have distributed through LifeWay. That number is around 2.5 million. There are those who live in the world of statistics that suggest the number is two to three times that based on the fact that we have almost 100 cooperating ministries conducting TLW through their organizations and the fact that groups will make their own personalized commitment cards for their students" [54].

in the autonomous father/husband), the words are more than just the reflection of an intention of an individual or a religious community. Rather, they are a sociopolitical practice that shapes and constrains possibilities for the subject and relationships.

It is not coincidental that this pledge appears to be most commonly made or conceived by non-poor white men who, in the United States today, represent the upper part of what feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls the kyriarchal pyramid ([56], pp. ix, 6). For Schüssler Fiorenza, the kyriarchal pyramid functions to “redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination...[It] is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, or ruling and oppression” ([57], p. 211). The further down one goes on the pyramid to more marginalized and oppressed groups, the less likely it becomes that a convincing case could be made that individual will and determination could lead to the outcomes that one desires. If we take seriously the experiences of minoritized and disenfranchised groups who are most subject to structures of domination (e.g., women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, the poor, and sexual minorities), it is clear that hard work and will are not adequate to bring into being what one desires, either in oneself or in the world more generally. Rosemary Hennessy underlines this perspective in her work *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, where she notes that “‘reality’, whether in the form of ‘women’s lives’ or from the feminist standpoint is always social” ([58], p. 75). It is only through the logic of privilege and domination that the self can be framed as the “unproblematic center of the universe” ([55], p. 127) and that the effectiveness and possibility of a pledge grounded solely in one’s own will could seem possible.

Over the years, Randy and Lisa Wilson have rhetorically distanced themselves from the claim that purity balls are meant to emphasize or ritualize girls’ commitment to remain sexually pure until heterosexual marriage; they instead emphasize that the event is about encouraging fathers to fulfill the role as a protector of their daughters’ sexual purity and as general “leaders” for their daughters [59]. In a 2007 *Maclean’s* article, Randy Wilson states, “We’re not saying that girls shouldn’t take a purity pledge. But this isn’t about telling the girls to abstain from sex” ([60], pp. 66–68). In a 2008 *L.A. Times* article, he notes, “It is a fatherhood event, not a virginity or abstinence event. We don’t think it’s appropriate to put that weight on the daughter’s shoulders” [61]. As difficult as these statements are to reconcile with the teachings produced and consumed in the context of purity balls, one of the key points that these statements bring to the fore is that fathers, acting individually, are ordained, as the “high priest,” to be the primary moral actors in the world.

In one sense, Wilson’s framing confirms many of the findings in this study: it “isn’t about telling girls to abstain from sex” [60]. It is about much more. Whether or not a girl makes a pledge is mostly irrelevant. In this vein, the fathers are the autonomous, powerful moral actors and the rightful authority over both wives and children. Wilson frames this situation as one in service of the daughter: “we don’t think it is appropriate to put that weight on the daughter’s shoulders” [61]. Yet, from the perspective of women and girls who are able, and may wish, to make and negotiate decisions and relationships in their lives, such a framing can be a challenge. In the worst case, it presents impossible situations for girls who often do not have a wide range of options in selecting or changing their family situations or religious communities, and yet at the same time are not able or willing to conform to sexual purity ideals.

4. “Your Father Can Fill That Special Guy-Shaped Hole in Your Heart”

The father-daughter rhetoric that comes out of the purity balls, where the father-daughter relationship is understood to be hierarchical and the daughter’s role is primarily to remain receptive to the father’s protection, guidance, and care, is reflective of rhetoric throughout the sexual purity literature. A particularly pointed example of the construction of fathers needing to play a prominent role in the monitoring and protecting of girls’ purity is found in the 2004 book *The Three Weavers: A Father’s Guide to Guarding His Daughter’s Purity* [62]. The book is one among several that focus on the importance of the father-daughter relationship and the unique role of the father in protecting

and cultivating his daughter's sexual purity [63,64]. In the case of *The Three Weavers*, the book is meant as a guide and workbook for fathers who are charged with "guiding" their daughter and "protecting her purity" [62]. The author suggests that these dynamics are accomplished through a very close monitoring of nearly all aspects of a daughter's life. For instance, fathers are encouraged to "go window shopping" with their daughters because "this is a great way for you to teach her your standards on modest clothing, training her in what is acceptable to wear and what isn't" ([62], p. 85). Fathers are to "protect [the daughter] from men that are not qualified" for heterosexual marriage to her and to "cultivate obedience" in daughters because "this trait is necessary for her to have in order for you to guard her heart" ([62], p. 85). Just as in the father's pledge, there is very little sense in the book that girls should play an active role in their own romantic, sexual, or religious lives and development—they are to be cared for by their father, watched closely, and are groomed for heterosexual marriage, at which time the care for the daughter (and the authority to which she submits) is transferred to the husband.

The role of the father to control and monitor his daughter's sexual, romantic, and spiritual life and then pass that role of control and monitoring to the husband is highlighted not only through purity balls and literature that focus on the father-daughter relationship but also through the increasingly common rhetoric (and accompanying practices) of modern-day courting. This practice is not uniform across conservative Christian families or churches that promote sexual purity. Nonetheless, even when it is not practiced strictly or uniformly, it informs the norms and expectations around adolescent romantic relationships in conservative Christian contexts and is pervasive throughout the writing on sexual purity. The modern conservative Christian approach to courting was popularized by Joshua Harris in the well-known 1997 book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* [65], but can also be found in a wide range of books in the context of discussions on sexual purity and Christian marriage [66–69]. It has also gained traction in recent years, as it is an important part of the narrative of the conservative Christian Duggar family, the focus of The Learning Channel (TLC) television show *19 Kids and Counting* [70]. In this model, girls no longer date but are courted by male suitors through their father. The daughter is responsible for praying for her father's discernment and for making sure that she is not dressing provocatively or "tempting" young men in other ways [71,72]. For instance, in *Revolve*, a popular "Biblezine" for adolescent girls, the authors of the commentary encourage readers to imagine Jesus shopping with them and to ask themselves if he would be "pleased with the outfit you're about to buy" ([73], p. 167).

Sexual purity teachings and the emphasis on this hierarchical father-daughter relationship discourages adolescent girls from grappling with the hard questions about what sort of sexual or romantic relationship they would like to have, when or with whom they would like to have it, and how it relates to their religious identity and practices. They are to turn these questions over to their father. The primary role of young women in this context is to make sure that they are sufficiently heeding their father's guidance and, with the help of their fathers, to make sure that they are monitoring their body well enough such that it does not tempt men. They are asked to concern themselves with men's desires, with the implication that if men are "tempted" by the ways that girls dress or act, it is the fault of the girls, who did not sufficiently consider "the ways that men are sexually tempted" ([74]; pp. 120–21; [75], p. 38; [76], p. 66).

The focus on the role of the father in the family and in monitoring the life of his daughter brings to the fore the ways that sexual activity is only a small part of the sexual purity movement. This is underscored in the literature by the concept of renewed purity or secondary virginity.¹⁴ Because identity formation and relational ordering are so central to the movement, renewed purity or secondary virginity allows these processes to continue even when there is an incident or time period in which an adolescent girl participates in some type of sexual activity that is discouraged by sexual purity

¹⁴ For scholarly work on secondary virginity, see ([77] pp. 51–54, 94–97; [78]). For a popular media example of the discussion of secondary virginity, see [79]. For examples of promotion of secondary virginity, see [80–84].

teachings. The rhetoric of renewed purity or secondary virginity emphasizes that sexual purity can be restored even if one has already been sexually active prior to heterosexual marriage, where “sexually active” is understood to range from kissing to penile-vaginal intercourse. Many of the sexual purity teachings advocate waiting until engagement or marriage to kiss ([74]; pp. 152, 158, 161–63; [85], p. 91). The production and consumption of secondary virginity or renewed purity underlines the importance of identity and relationship management. As *The Silver Ring Thing Sexual Abstinence Study Bible* reminds the readers, “Purity is a way of life.” ([86], p. 14).

Much of the father-daughter rhetoric goes even further than simply suggesting that girls need fathers to protect them; it often frames the father-daughter relationship as *one that replaces girls’ romantic relationships with young men*. When the rhetoric achieves its aims, this creates a situation where daughters are even more dependent on their fathers. Self-proclaimed “national expert in abstinence and modesty” [87], Dannah Gresh asserts that she has seen a pattern in which girls whose parents (particularly fathers) are involved in their dating life possess a “vital secret” in the “pursuit of a lifestyle of purity” ([85], p. 116). She goes so far as to argue that “your father can fill that special guy-shaped hole in your heart” and that “girls who lack a positive father/daughter relationship are very much a risk to be sexually active” ([85], p. 117). In *The Power of Abstinence*, author Kristine Napier highlights a study where teenage girls stated that they “swapped sexual encounters for the fathering they felt they weren’t getting” ([88], p. 67), and narrative after narrative points out the importance of fathers exercising leadership over their daughters’ romantic and sexual lives (or lack thereof) prior to heterosexual marriage ([74], pp. 43–62). Across the genre of conservative Christian literature that focuses on the relationship between fathers, daughters, and sexual purity, the role of the father is protector and guide in all areas (not just sexual purity). Often there is an implicit or explicit argument that until girls are ready to consider marriage, a close relationship with one’s father can replace the need for romantic attention from boys or young men. Kylie Miraldi, 18 years old, notes the following in the *Time* feature on purity balls:

On my wedding day, he’ll give [the key to my heart represented by the jewelry locket and key] to my husband. It’s a symbol of my father giving up the covering of my heart, protecting me, since it means my husband is now the protector ([38]).

Ultimately, in a world of profound insecurity, where the white U.S. American kyriarchal head of the household/nation/state/church is challenged not only by feminist rhetoric, action, and activism, but also by increasing economic and political insecurity, the construction of the high priest of the household as a central part of father-daughter purity rhetoric can be understood, at least in part, as a response to this insecurity. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, Susan Faludi contends that post-World War II U.S. American men have been socialized into a particular understanding of masculinity that is defined, primarily, in economic and material terms as a provider [89]. There is understandable feminist criticism that the tone of this book is too apologetic and problematically focuses only on working class, white, U.S. American men. Yet, her analysis still proves helpful in articulating the extent to which the globalized economic system is central to the construction of contemporary masculinity. The illusion of the hard-working “independent unit that is an autonomous, self-determining ego” ([55], p. 123) provides the foundation for much of the religious and cultural imagination in the U.S. As this identity becomes more difficult to maintain, the amplification of the father-daughter rhetoric in recent years points to a redoubling of efforts to affirm and strengthen the very illusion that is threatened. The control of one’s family—more specifically, one’s adolescent daughter(s)—can be seen as a move to narrow the field of concern so that it is more easily manageable. It is difficult to maintain the illusion of an independent, self-determining ego in a functionally differentiated world where even previously privileged classes such as middle-class, white, U.S. American men are unable to avoid profound economic, and thus more general, insecurity. However, adolescent daughters are clearly a “realm” in which power can be more easily exercised and maintained, thus providing an illusion of stability and control, a way to manage the insecurity of our modern existence.

If we follow Judith Butler's foundational insights into the constructed and performative nature of sex and gender [90] and the heterosexist regime that is dependent on these categories, the central role that father-daughter rhetoric plays in constructing sexual purity becomes even more apparent. Through this lens, we see that the father-daughter balls and the literature that idealizes the father-daughter relationship and narrowly defined sex/gender roles works to intensify and provide a forum for the ongoing reiteration of the sex/gender distinctions that are essential to maintenance of the kyriarchal structures. Through dance, jewelry, pledges, rituals, and rhetoric, the balls provide a context for performing and continuing the process of producing sex and gender in ways that diminish the full humanity of not only women but of all people who are woven into the kyriarchal existence: men and women, boys and girls. The producers and consumers of father-daughter rhetoric are, often inadvertently, responding to a world where their insistence on the naturalness of sex and gender belies its very constructedness and instability. The need to insist with ever more forceful language, to intensify these rhetorical practices through complex and public ritual, underscores the vulnerability of these constructs to other rhetorics and practices. A clearer articulation and interrogation of the rhetorical practices that construct sex and gender can thus open up more possibilities for intervening, disrupting, and ultimately changing these structures.

In addition to concerns about the ways that the sexual purity movement shapes and constrains possibilities of subject and relationship formation, a significant amount of feminist criticism of purity balls and the father-daughter relationship in the context of the sexual purity movement raises questions about the potentially incestuous overtones of such language and framing ([91]; [10], pp. 66–69; [48,92]). There is little to no evidence that those who attend the balls or create them perceive this risk or concern. Yet, irrespective of this awareness or the intentions of purity ball creators, it is important to note that father-daughter incest and step-father-daughter incest in the U.S. cannot be characterized as rare, and it is more prevalent in families with "patriarchal characteristics" ([93,94]; [95], pp. 88–89; [96]). There are estimates that one million U.S. Americans have been victims of father-daughter incest, with approximately sixteen thousand new cases each year ([94], p. 102).¹⁵ In her book on the sexual abuse of children, Aphrodite Matsakis argues that this estimate is far too low because it fails to adequately account for the experiences of low-income and minority women [97].

Regardless of exact numbers, it seems important to note that rituals such as father-daughter purity balls and the father-daughter rhetoric that pervades sexual purity literature is problematic for two reasons related specifically to sexual abuse within families. First, given the research that shows that father-daughter incest is more prevalent in families with "patriarchal characteristics", ritualizing and valorizing those characteristics seems to run the risk of increasing the abuse. Second, for girls who are survivors of sexual abuse by their fathers or a father figure, the rhetorical idealization of the father-daughter relationship, where common rhetoric includes slogans such as "date your dad" [98,99], "cover your daughter" [27], and "your dad can fill the hole in your heart" ([85], p. 117; [100]) run the risk of being triggering¹⁶ and giving the sense that abuse is acceptable or ordained by God and the church. In the book *Fathers and Daughters: Raising Polished Cornerstones*, young author Elyse Barrett tells readers:

I thought my family and my parents were "great people"—even awesome people! I was happy to be a part of the family, but I did not realize that God loved me *so much* that He placed me in the *perfect* family . . . it meant that I was in the *best* place. He made me and fashioned me . . . breathed the breath of life into me and placed me in *my family!* Your family will not be perfect, but as your perspective changes, you will realize that you are in the *perfect family* . . . Realize how blessed and privileged you are ([63], p. 35).

¹⁵ Note that nearly every study on father-daughter incest states that it has been understudied, and Tierney and Corwin [95] argue it has been "grossly understudied." Accurate estimates are extraordinarily difficult to obtain due the fact that it is such a stigmatized and underreported crime.

¹⁶ For more on triggers for sexual assault victims see, for instance, [101].

Such rhetoric puts the thousands of girls who are survivors of incest in an impossible and tragic position of wondering if God *intended* them to be such victims. Coupled with language about obedience and authority where the father is to provide girls with the love that they are not receiving from boyfriends and is to “be the man your daughter would marry” ([63], p. 140) such rhetoric runs the risk of *fostering* conditions for potentially abusive and harmful relationships between fathers and daughters.

The analysis in the following section builds on these concerns where women and adolescent girls’ experiences, desires, and abilities to be active and engaged in making decisions about their spiritual and romantic lives are not only discouraged and disregarded, but are often dismissed as *antithetical* to being a good family member, citizen, and Christian. The rhetoric constructs the ideal girl as Christian, primarily passive, thin, white, and beautiful, where her worth is affirmed through her relationship with her father, and later, her husband. This emphasis on the ideal Christian adolescent girl, as defined primarily in relationship to the male figure in her life, is related to the strong emphasis on the princess figure in the balls and throughout the sexual purity and father-daughter rhetoric. Like the princess figure, father-daughter rhetoric constructs girls as a symbol that *stands for* and *represents* her family, her church, and the nation-state—as a site at which political, religious, business, and family issues can be negotiated.

5. Protecting and Consuming Princess-Daughters

Even a cursory glance at father-daughter purity balls reveals that one of the main selling points is the dress-up aspect, where girls get to be “princesses”. In The Learning Channel’s 2008 documentary on purity balls, Lisa Wilson notes that she hoped that purity balls would be appealing because they have “elegance, romance, and extravagance—all the things that girls find attractive” [102]. Lauren Wilson, the daughter of Randy and Lisa Wilson, states in *The New York Times’* purity ball article, “It’s amazing. You feel like a princess getting to dress up and knowing the person you’re dancing with loves you so much” [37]. Danny Schnell, who has taken his daughter to three purity balls, notes that one of the best parts of the ball is that his daughter “got all dressed up like the prom . . . ” [61]. The purity ball sponsored by Arizona Baptist Children’s Services notes that “your daughter will see how much you value her when you dress up and take her out for an entire evening” [103]. The P.R.O.M. purity ball, sponsored by the Agape Fellowship of Cleveland, Wisconsin, notes that this is a chance for fathers to “make her feel like the princess that she is.” They also note that “this is your chance to lavish your princess with your high regard for her and her future” [104].

In addition to the rhetoric that explicitly discusses princesses, a “ball”, of course, evokes visions of fairytales and princesses. There are instances of purity balls being held in castle-like locations,¹⁷ and the tiaras that many girls wear to the balls reinforce the idea that they are like princesses or should be treated as such. The website for the Wilson family notes that, “Because we cherish our daughters as regal princesses—for 1 Peter 3:4 says they are ‘precious in the sight of God’—we want to treat them as royalty” [106].

This emphasis on princesses underlines the centrality of the idealized princess figure in the father-daughter rhetoric and provides a context in which to highlight the raced and classed aspects of the rhetoric. It also underscores the complex and mutually sustaining relationship between sexual purity rhetoric and our contemporary economic structures.¹⁸ The princess imagery and language is extraordinarily common in popular secular culture and in conservative Christian writings about

¹⁷ See, for example, the father-daughter purity ball in Chandler, Arizona sponsored by First Southern Baptist Church and New Life Pregnancy Centers. The ball’s organizer notes that the ball is held at Castle at the Ashley Manor because “it’s kind of fairytale romantic” [105].

¹⁸ For more on the connections between globalization and the religious right, see ([107], pp. 36–40).

girls and young women [108–111].¹⁹ Peggy Orenstein explores the secular focus on princesses in her popular book, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* [112]. She writes about the ways that princess imagery and rhetoric impoverishes the possibilities for girls to understand themselves as complex moral beings with a wide range of options for the way that they live and love. One might be tempted to ask to what extent the popularity of princesses in secular culture has influenced its prevalence in conservative Christian rhetoric and *vice versa*, but the relationship is more complex than this. Much in the same way that the interests of the traditional male-headed family and the nation-state overlap and sustain each other [14,113,114], the similarities in conservative Christianity and popular culture can be read as an indication that these rhetorical systems are deeply woven together and mutually influential, springing from the same place where, as Emilie Townes argues, all “human lives and cultures have become commodities that are marketed and consumed in the global marketplace” ([55], p. 3). Along with Christine Gardner’s work in *Making Chastity Sexy* [12], Townes’ analysis helps to explicate the extent to which the father-daughter rhetoric is used to “sell” a vision of the ideal person where fathers are the high-priest leaders of the household, and the ideal daughter is an attractive, pure, feminine, mostly passive representative of the family and the Christian nation-state, preparing for a heterosexual marriage.

Many of the purity balls have a yearly theme, often relating to princesses. For instance, the Ark-La-Tex Crisis Pregnancy Center purity ball has had the theme of “The Princess Within” [115]. Other examples include “Stay in the Castle” [116], “The King is Enthralled by Your Beauty”, and “The Princess and the Kiss”.²⁰ The latter title comes from a popular Christian children’s book titled *The Princess and the Kiss: A Story of God’s Gift of Purity* [118].²¹ The book is meant to promote the idea that girls should remain sexually pure until marriage. It is the story of a beautiful, thin, white princess who is to save her “kiss” as a gift for the man she marries. She declines men that are wealthy, handsome, and charming, until a common man comes to her and says he desired to marry her after he saw that her “beauty was marvelous”, and her “purity sparkled like diamonds” ([118], p. 22). As it turns out, he also saved his “kiss” for her and they were married, soon had a child, and lived happily ever after. There is an accompanying guide, *Life Lessons from the Princess and the Kiss*, that includes “princess prayers”, “royal reminders”, “helpful hints”, and directions for a purity ceremony, all designed for parents to “help your daughter understand how precious her purity is and how important it is to protect it carefully” ([119], p. 21) The story of *The Princess and the Kiss* and the accompanying guide is particularly explicit in framing girls as delicate white princesses where purity bestows moral value and, at the same time, makes one a desirable sexual and marriage partner.

The rhetoric of daughters as their fathers’ princesses (and sometimes God’s) [111] underlines one of the most omnipresent characteristics of sexual purity rhetoric—that ideal girls (and later, women) are “naturally” feminine and should thus express traditional feminine characteristics: passivity, deferral, gentleness, beauty, and closeness to nature.²² In *Celebrations of Faith*, Randy and Lisa Wilson are clear that they understood this theme to be central to the logic of the purity ball:

The father-daughter purity ball is an incredible dedication of beauty and grace. We decorate every table with a different calligraphy banner describing the feminine spirit: gentleness, purity, graciousness, kindness, beautiful, precious, a treasure, helper/completer and life-giver ([121], p. 142).

¹⁹ Note that many refer to Ransomed Heart Ministries, led by John and Stasi Eldredge as the center of “the Christian Princess Movement,” particularly via the popularity of their book *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul* [110], although the focus of their work is on adult women as “princesses.” There is also an entire series of “princess” products by Sheila Walsh. *Gigi, God’s Little Princess* [111] is the first book in the series. There are a wide range of other “God’s Little Princess” books, toys, costumes, devotional bibles, and DVDs available for purchase.

²⁰ The final two themes come from the 2008 and 2009 purity balls sponsored by Daybreak Crisis Pregnancy Center in Charleston, South Carolina [117].

²¹ “Royal Reminders,” “Princess Prayers” and “helpful hints for parents” are included in each chapter.

²² On the need for girls and women to conform to traditional understandings of femininity, see especially [120].

In order to see the ways that princess imagery and language evokes a particular prescription for how life is lived in relationship to family, nation, and men, we only need to think back to popular fairytales. The princess is primarily passive, delicate, and fragile, often left to the mercy of the king to marry her off or a prince to rescue her, and is asked to make great sacrifices or to live a life that is not of her own choosing.

There is debate among feminist scholars as to whether the figure of the princess that is so common in fairy tales and popular culture is harmful and constraining to girls and women.²³ While fairy tales and depictions of princesses are not always one-dimensional [128], and there certainly is the possibility of finding fissures and breaks in the traditional narrative where princesses *do* have power and possibilities beyond marriage, motherhood, and symbolism, this is the exception. If we understand girls and women as fully human, deserving of equality and justice, exceptions to the norm and fissures in the structures subordination are not enough.

Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario's article "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess" [129] provides a helpful and thorough overview of scholarship on princesses in popular culture in the U.S., with a focus (although not exclusive) on Disney princesses. Yet, even after painstakingly detailing the oppressive and constraining rhetoric about princesses throughout the Disney stories and more generally in popular culture, and drawing on a wide range of literature that makes the same case, she extols a relatively minor shift in the trope of Disney princesses. She notes that in later Disney princess films, the princess has some measure of power in her world, whereas before she was *entirely* passive and helpless. Do Rozario closes by noting, seemingly victoriously, that "the Disney kingdom may still seem a man's world, but it is a man's world dependent on a princess" ([129], p. 57).

She does not note the irony that this situation is not only true in the movies themselves, but literally true for the Disney company, which is financially dependent on princesses. Disney notes that the "princess brand" is "among the fastest growing Disney Company Product brands," totaling [as of 2011] over \$4 billion in worldwide retail sales and \$2.5 billion in box office sales worldwide. The princess line is "The No. 1 girls license toy brand in the United States among all girls and the No. 1 toy brand for dolls and role play among girls ages 2–5" [130]. Both the Disney "Kingdom" and sexual purity rhetoric are dependent on the princess figure, but there is little evidence that this contributes toward girls and women having more say over their own lives, futures, or identities.

Although Do Rozario does not draw explicitly on Mary Keller's work in the *Hammer and the Flute* [131], Keller's account of power echoes Do Rozario's positive assessment of a "man's world" "dependent on princesses" [129]. Keller's work is an attempt of a feminist scholar of religion to find a way to theorize agency in contexts where it appears that women have little agency, similar to Do Rozario's attempt to find some agency for princesses in the Disney Kingdom and broader U.S. culture. Do Rozario and Keller are both attempting, in some ways, to make sense of why women and girls appear to willingly take part in worlds that do not appear to offer them a promise or ideal of equality, justice, or freedom, and to rethink agency in that context.

Keller's work focuses on women who are possessed by spirits or ancestors. In this context, she posits a theory of instrumental agency which seeks to account for the unconfirmable-but-assumed real agency of ancestors and spirits. She develops an understanding of instrumental agency that (drawing from Asad ([132], p. 15)) separates agency from consciousness ([131], pp. 60–65). Asad argues, and Keller follows him on this argument, that when agency-located-in-individual-consciousness is understood as a framework that can work against oppressive structures (such as those faced by girls and women subject to the logic of the sexual purity movement), it is problematic. Asad and Keller

²³ For discussion on this, see [122–125]. See Jack Zipes on the role of fairy tales to delineate "proper behavior and demeanor in all types of situations" ([126], p. 23) and the theme that "young women are helpless ornaments in need of protection . . ." ([127], p. 203).

argue that this is because it is the very understanding of the possibility of a free agent that can act autonomously to change structures of power that causes the oppression in the first place.

Like Do Rozario, who announces with some degree of appreciation that the princesses at least have some power in a “man’s world” ([129], p. 57), Keller can be read to consider instrumental agency a victory of some sort. Even if women cannot exercise agency as individual human beings, Keller argues, they can at least be used in some meaningful way. For Keller, like a hammer that builds a house or a flute that plays music, women who are possessed matter and have a type of agency, even if ultimately they have little control over it and it is not tied to their own consciousness. This position sounds quite like the idea of a princess whose beauty, virtue, and purity is what makes her valuable because it is “used” by or “played” by others: her father, her nation, her husband, or the company that produces the product that she is used to sell. It is true that in the case of the hammer, the house as we know it would not be possible. Similarly, fairy tales, the nation, family, and girlhood in the U.S. as we know it would not be possible without the princess figure. But in all of these cases—the princess, the hammer, the flute, and the possessed woman—they are the acted-upon: *the site at which power converges*. For Keller, the agency is with the spirit or ancestor that possesses the woman who is, as Keller repeats *ad nauseam*, a body ([131], pp. 1–3, 6, 8–11, 28, 37, 49, 70–76).

In the case of the possessed women of Keller’s work, the princesses of Disney, and girls in the sexual purity balls, women and girls become a *site* of agency—the place where other powers are at work. Girls are extolled not to think, pray, and work to determine the shape of the relationships that they will have with families, romantic partners, or the church, but rather to be open to and ask for guidance from their fathers. Keller and Do Rozario represent a trend in feminist thinking that has ceded the possibilities for women to have power and agency in their own right, as fragile, partial, and constrained, as a “free” and knowable subjective self might be. Do Rozario’s work on princesses and Keller’s work on possession point to a trend that runs the risk of narrowing, rather than widening, the space for girls and women to have a say about the shape of their relationships, lives, religiosity, and roles in bringing about their well-being, should they desire such a say.

This brings us back to the point that while particular sexual acts are often understood to impact sexual purity, the question of when or with whom penile-vaginal intercourse takes place is only a small part of the movement. The central work of sexual purity rhetoric is the ordering of relationships, and the cultivation of people who are striving toward an ideal which leads them to willingly submit to the order of these relationships as ordained by God. When the ideal woman and girl are recognized as the sites on which powers act, rather than as powerful and deserving of power in their own right, it creates a situation that both reflects and sustains kyriarchal structures. Thus, the ideal girl who is like a princess (*i.e.*, subject to particular raced and classed regimes of beauty, subject to the needs of her family and her nation, and preparing for her role as an “uncontaminated” subordinate wife [133,134]) maintains kyriarchal power structures. Because princesses have a particular cultural currency right now and are widely viewed as natural and harmless [135–138], they provide a convenient figure for naturalizing sex and gender rhetoric that constructs girls and women as feminine, passive, receptive, and in need of protection by men.

In emphasizing the moral value of the father-daughter relationship in the context of a heterosexual household, tropes of race and class are necessarily mobilized.²⁴ In the U.S., roughly 60 percent of children live in a household with both married biological parents [142,143]. Yet, when this statistic is broken down by socio-economic status and ethnic identity, we can see that an emphasis on the moral value of the father-daughter relationship and a home where the father is the high priest of the household favors white, non-poor families. While 68 percent of non-Hispanic whites live with their married biological parents, only 52 percent of Hispanics and 29 percent of African-Americans do [143]. Similarly, in terms of class, 10 percent of children in married-couple families live in poverty,

²⁴ On the impossibility of conceptualizing or understanding gender, class, and race apart from one another, see [139–141].

compared to 46 percent of children in female-headed households [144]. In short, households where there is a husband and a wife who are the parents to children in that household are more likely to be both white and of a higher socio-economic class. Thus, the ideal family in the context of sexual purity rhetoric is not only a heterosexual father-headed household but is also a household that is both non-poor and white.

Finally, we can see the ways that this dynamic at the intersection of class and race is in continuity with a father-daughter rhetoric that is, in part, formed via the ability of individuals and families to consume sexual purity merchandise and pay to attend events. The sexual purity industry focuses on producing products and events to sell, both figuratively and literally, sexual purity, and the concomitant relationship between fathers and daughters. Even while those who promote sexual purity and the father-daughter relationship often frame their work as “counter-cultural” [145–147], it is easy to see the ways that the rhetoric is deeply enmeshed in the mainstream cultural practice of branding, with use of products and pay-to-attend events as its indispensable technologies for the formation of the subject and relationships.

This examination of the father-daughter rhetoric can act as a critical lens into how larger systems of domination weave together and become ultimately inextricable. If we long for a world where we are freer from these structures, we must better understand and articulate the way that they function together as a dynamic system that is enacted and continually modified for its own perpetuation, often through sociopolitical rhetorical practices. The rhetorical practices involve not only what we say in a traditional venue such as the pulpit but also are shaped and emerge from the ways that we construct and enact religious ritual, the jewelry and clothes that we buy and wear, the idealized figures (father, princess, daughter) we produce and long for, and the books and websites that we read and write. In examining the father-daughter rhetoric, we are not writing of, as Townes puts it, “‘the Other’ as a social problem, of an object of too many Derridas, Foucaults, or Spivaks; but the folks that are really just round the corner” ([55], p. 31). As we engage these questions of rhetoric, sexual purity, fathers, daughters, princesses, and God, we are engaging our own world, where we can collaborate with the structures that produce the white, male-headed/submissive-female, non-poor, heterosexual family as ideal and good, or we can question and resist such structures in a way that nevertheless takes seriously the ways that they are woven together with sincere and well-intentioned religious commitment.

6. Other Possibilities

Through her work with the feminist theoretical model of historical reconstruction, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that “women are and always have been historical subjects and agents” ([148], p. 92). There has never been a time when people have not been asking if things could be otherwise and have not been doing the hard work that continually brings this state of affairs into being. In the same vein, Townes calls us to counter memory, “not the rejection but the reconstitution of history” that “helps to disrupt ignorance and invisibility”, “to challenge the false generations and gross stereotypes often found in what passes for ‘history’ in the United States”, disrupting “our status quo because they do not rest solely or wholly on objectivity or facts” ([55], p. 47). Neither the feminist model of historical reconstruction nor counter memory, however, is reserved for history long passed and must not even necessarily be reserved only for history. Both approaches remind us not only that another world is possible but also that such a world is already in progress.

Thus, through the analysis of the father-daughter rhetoric that seeks to render adolescent girls as passive symbols and fathers as strong, authoritative, and invulnerable, we do not deconstruct the way things are and stare at a now empty horizon and hope for new possibilities. Rather, we reveal the ways that a different world, with new and creative structures, is already in progress and has been, since there have been people to long for a different world. The father-daughter rhetoric is a sociopolitical practice that creates a particular kind of world in order to produce and manage particular identities and relationships. Yet, such rhetoric is only uttered, written, and enacted because there is a sense and possibility that it might be otherwise. We should rest assured that the forcefulness

of the father-daughter rhetoric in conservative Christian contexts and the hold that princesses and consumerist logic can sometimes seem to have on the popular imagination gestures toward the precariousness of such structures. Feminist historical reconstruction and counter memory both provide frameworks to read not only the past but also the present differently. The rhetoric reveals both a past and a current struggle for the power to name and to negotiate the challenges of a complex world. In parsing the language that father-daughter rhetoric uses to construct sexual purity, we make further progress toward a world that honors the possibilities for women and girls—and men and boys—together with communities of solidarity, to determine how they will navigate the complex, dynamic, and often exciting nexus of sexuality, love, romance, God, faith, and families of all kinds.

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