

Purity's Appeal:
Sexual Culture and the Abstinence Movement

by

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Class of 2009

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

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Acknowledgements

I am endlessly grateful to those whose support and love sustained me throughout this project and everything leading up to it:

To my advisor, Betsy Traube, who received the initial sparks of this thesis from halfway across the world and sent back more ideas and encouragement than I could have hoped for. Thank you for your dedication, your advice, and your patience. My writing (and surely my vocabulary) has flourished under your guidance.

To the Anthropology Department and the members of ANTH 400, who have given me an academic community. Thank you for your support, your feedback, and for inspiring me with your work.

To Mary-Jane Rubenstein and Margot Weiss, who graciously agreed to read this thesis.

To my parents, Nina and Simon Rosenstein, for their unconditional everything. Thank you for taking me seriously.

To my brother, Jacob, who housed me for my journey into Queens and visited me in the craze of writing. Thank you for not letting me take myself too seriously.

To Grandma, who asked all year: “You’re going to let me read that paper, right?” Your faith in me gives me strength.

To my housemates, who made a home on Home. Thank you for dinners, talks, adventures, and the occasional primal scream.

To my friends, who always lend an ear, a hand, a shoulder. I am so glad I know you.

Introduction

At the 2008 MTV Video Music Awards, host Russell Brand made fun of the pop group the Jonas Brothers for wearing purity rings that signify their pledge to abstain from sex until marriage. “In case you are unaware,” he said, “each of the Jonas Brothers does wear a tiny ring as a mark of their commitment to God. I’d take it a little bit more seriously if they wore it on their genitals. . . .it is a little bit ungrateful, ’cause they could literally have sex with any woman that they want. . . .they’re just not gonna do it.” Later in the evening, singer Jordin Sparks took advantage of her time at the microphone to respond. She held up her left hand adorned with a promise ring and declared: “I just have one thing to say about promise rings. It’s not bad to wear a promise ring, because not everybody—guy or girl—wants to be a slut” (McKee 2008).

This heated exchange is indicative of the contested grounds of the contemporary sexual abstinence movement. The sexuality of young people—and particularly young celebrities—is a topic of public conversation. Before this awards show, the Jonas Brothers as well as Jordin Sparks had publicly discussed their choices to abstain from sex until marriage. Representations of sexual abstinence in the popular media oscillate between praise and blame. As both Brand’s mockery and Sparks’ defense of purity rings demonstrate, abstinence today is not the norm but a minority position that typically requires justification. Brand connects the Jonas Brothers’ purity rings to religion and playfully alludes to the practical downsides of

such a choice. Sparks, in turn, calls upon the morally charged cultural dichotomy of the virgin and the slut to affirm abstinence as a superior choice within a binary field.

In recent years, abstinence has gained an increasing presence in media representations and in social life. Through abstinence-only education, purity rings, pledge events, college clubs, and literature, a multifaceted abstinence movement is growing. Advocates of abstinence are critical of what they see as an over-permissive, hypersexualized youth culture, and they defend total sexual abstinence until marriage as a central component in a wider program of moral reform. When I began to pay attention to the movement, what puzzled me most was a framing of traditional sexual ideology as a sexual counterculture. As a liberal feminist, I acknowledge and am grateful that sexual norms and popular ideology are more liberal than in previous decades. Still, I believe that individuals and society continue to be restricted by the persistence of a residual sexual ideology that is shaped by a gendered double standard and denies the variety of individuals' needs and desires. I was confused to hear this ideology, sometimes cloaked in liberal and feminist language, being offered as a countercultural movement.

In my initial research on the abstinence movement, nearly all the commentary on abstinence from outside the movement seemed journalistic, even voyeuristic. Though a growing movement literature indicated that abstinence advocates were in dialogue—expanding upon and critiquing one other's ideas and strategies—the conversation between proponents and opponents of abstinence until marriage was sharply polarized. My own reactions to abstinence ideology were admittedly negative, but I hoped to consider the movement in more depth and to reflect on its merits as

well as its limitations rather than writing it off immediately as reactionary or offensive.

With this project, I aim to complicate the abstinence movement and to understand it within the context of mainstream sexual culture. I focus on several of the movement's social components, such as literature, pledge events, and college clubs, to see how they collectively construct a nuanced discourse.¹ I analyze the ways in which abstinence advocates imagine their opponents, as well as the strategies they use and compromises they make in reaching out to potential participants. I consider why abstinence might appeal to young people and what gratifications it may provide. My goal in this project is to understand the appeal of abstinence for those who embrace it and to critically analyze what I regard as its limitations.

When I began my research, I approached the abstinence movement as a singular phenomenon. As I navigated and pieced together various sites of the movement, however, combining ethnography with textual analysis, I was increasingly struck by its internal diversity. Rather than speaking in a single, unified voice, movement discourse takes a range of different, partially overlapping forms; I focus selectively on specific contexts in an effort to convey contrasting inflections of the message.

I spent much of the summer immersing myself in movement literature and searching the internet for abstinence-related sites, such as Pure Love Club's "Chastity Q&A," which offers extensive explanations for questions such as "How far is too

¹ I do not give as much consideration to abstinence-only education, though it is the most visible manifestation of the movement. I chose to focus on the aspects of the movement that potential participants engage with more voluntarily, such as privately-sponsored pledge events and literature, rather than sex education in public schools.

far?” To give my project an ethnographic dimension, I was also in search of a Purity Ball to attend, and I hoped to interview the student leaders of college abstinence clubs.

But the move toward fieldwork was difficult for me at first. I put off contacting the leaders of the college clubs because I was terrified I would not ask “the right questions”; I worried that I might waste the opportunity of speaking with them. When I did email the leaders of these clubs, I introduced myself as a student of anthropology working on an undergraduate thesis and proposed that we speak either by phone or email. I positioned myself as a curious observer rather than a prospective participant; I explained that I had been seeing more and more about abstinence on college campuses in the media, and I wanted to hear how they understood the movement and why they were participating in it. Nearly all the students I contacted agreed to speak with me, and in August 2008, I spoke with two student leaders—Bill and Andrea—by phone and corresponded with three others—Jonathan, Brandon, and Rachel—by email.

I was relatively comfortable with the relationship I initiated with my respondents; they were familiar with my position as a student researcher, and we live in similar campus-based social and sexual milieus. Somewhat more ambiguous was my own opinion on the movement. I did not announce my position on sexual politics, and thus it was unclear what they imagined it to be. Not wanting to be silent on my end of the phone, when I spoke with Bill and Andrea, I found myself making encouraging or agreeing interjections (such as laughing or saying, “That makes sense”) in response to their comments. Often, I did relate to an aspect of their stories.

But I wanted to present myself as impartial, and I was never sure how I should respond so as to avoid either falsely agreeing with their opinions or silencing them with my own. I did my best to negotiate this ambiguous line between honesty and deception.

In addition to speaking with college students, I sought out events to attend. I contacted Randy Wilson—the founder of the first Purity Ball—and the Abstinence Clearinghouse for advice about how to find such an event nearby. Neither was able to point me to one, but I came across one online. Held in Queens, New York, this Purity Ball seemed different from the ones I had seen portrayed in the media. It was sponsored by a conference of churches that serve an African American community. I asked the pastor’s permission to attend, being upfront about my position as a researcher, and he extended an invitation.

I was quite conspicuous at the Purity Ball I attended in October 2008. Aside from the pastor, none of the attendees expected me. As a young, unaccompanied white woman at an event attended by black teenage and adult congregants, I stuck out. I first made conversation with some people while waiting to check in and be assigned a table. One woman seemed a bit confused by my presence, asking if I were a mentor for a teenage participant. When I told her I was doing research, though, she was very receptive to speaking with me. At my table, I disclosed my research agenda to the man next to me, who was there videotaping the event at the request of the organizers. He got excited about my project and was eager to speak with me. But he seemed to align my interests with the goals of the Purity Ball, and I could not help but feel a bit guilty. He also wanted to interview me for his own documentation of the

event, and this threw me off entirely. I tried to avoid it and was glad he was busy most of the night. This potential reversal of the roles of researcher and subject was a surprise for which I was not prepared. I was not ready to discuss my findings, and I did not want to bring unnecessary controversy to the event by talking about my personal opinions on abstinence ideology.

Shortly after, someone at my table asked what church I attended, and my response—“actually, I’m Jewish”—set off a long conversation about how I had come to find this event. I did not explicitly mention my research motives, and later on, when the official programming had begun and I was taking notes, the woman I had been speaking with announced to the table with surprise and amusement—“Abby’s taking notes!” I felt uncomfortable for not disclosing my observer role, as my extensive note-taking was clearly not the appropriate way for a participant to experience the event. When I told her I was doing research, however, she was equally friendly. She took my email address and later sent me photos from the ball, wishing me good luck with my project.

The same day I had come across the Purity Ball online, I also found out about a Silver Ring Thing live event in Fairfield, Connecticut. Just one week after attending the ball, I drove to Sacred Heart University for another try at participant-observation. The Silver Ring Thing was a very different research experience because I was able to simply blend in. I was read as a participant, which was not surprising considering my casual dress and my status as young and white at an event in Fairfield, Connecticut. Additionally, in the more secular atmosphere my religion was not discussed, and I did not have to explain myself to anyone. In speaking with people, however, I still found

myself seeking out the event's organizers—such as the national traveling team—rather than simply conversing with teenage participants.

Throughout my fieldwork I was always more comfortable speaking with individuals who were aware of my research interests or who held positions of authority than engaging in casual conversation with participants. Walking up to groups of students at the two pledge events I attended was nerve-racking; I did not feel distanced enough (likely in terms of age) from the participants and found myself frustratingly self-conscious when approaching teenagers whom I assumed would not want to talk to a stranger. Students directly interacted only with their friends, and my attempts to approach them with simple comments or questions were socially unexpected and not always warmly received. The single-word or one-sentence answers to my tentative overtures seemed to confirm my sense of being an intruder.

In retrospect, it seems that in these situations I was trying to negotiate a position of authority. If the participants perceived me as an equal, they would brush me off with the quick answers of shy teenagers. But with those who knew my purpose, I could be an authoritative researcher and an observer, and fieldwork seemed less intimidating. Because my fieldwork took place at self-contained social events, the relationships I formed were short-lived, and I felt considerable pressure to get the most out of each interaction. Despite these limitations, fieldwork provided me with a much more nuanced understanding of the abstinence movement than I held originally.

My text-based research, too, allowed me to hear more insider voices, as well as outsider commentary on the abstinence movement. While aspects of these texts echo one other, none tell quite the same story. Sexual politics are complicated

because they are private and public; they involve both inward desires and outward practices, and they are connected to other aspects of our lives. The diversity of ideas, motivations, and strategies within the abstinence movement has shaken many of my preconceptions about it. Above all, I have been surprised to realize that parts of movement discourse resonate with my own experience, that abstinence offers one solution to problems I, too, have faced.

I was initially concerned about of my critical opinions on the abstinence movement, but I now believe that they gave me a heightened awareness of my subjectivity. They helped me to appreciate how enmeshed we all are in the politics of sex, wherever we may stand. It was my shock at abstinence rhetoric that brought me to this project in the first place; my preliminary reaction is exactly what the movement imagines itself to be up against. With this interpretive project, I aim to turn a reaction of anxiety into a means of understanding: to turn discomfort and worry into a critical analysis of a social movement.

Just as this project is partial in its subjectivity, so too is it necessarily partial in the sense of its incompleteness. I engaged with numerous movement texts, but there are countless more that I did not read. I attended two events, and I spoke with five students at length, but there are many voices I did not hear. Though I speak about “the movement,” I do so with the knowledge that my understanding is incomplete, that variations exist. Abstinence advocates understand themselves as offering a moral critique of the dominant cultural orientations toward sexual conduct, and I follow their initiative in categorizing their ideology, practice, and public presence as a social movement.

In the chapters that follow, I describe and analyze the history, strategies, and appeal of the contemporary sexual abstinence movement, and I present a critique of its limitations. In the first chapter, I situate the abstinence movement within a history of changing and contested sexual norms and ideologies. I describe the development of abstinence-only education and the expansion of the movement to include pledge events, clubs, and a growing body of literature. In the second chapter, I explore some of the major strategies and compromises within movement discourse and programs. I also consider critiques and disagreements from within the movement.

In the third chapter, I present my observations of the Purity Ball and the Silver Ring Thing as a means of contextualizing the respective strategies organizing these events. I analyze the ways in which potential participants are constructed and the problem for which abstinence is being posed as a solution. I consider why the movement's construction of the dilemmas of sexual culture and its presentation of abstinence as the solution might resonate with teenagers. In the fourth chapter, I present and reflect on my conversations with student leaders of college abstinence clubs. I analyze the trope of the "hookup culture" as an essentialized construction of campus sexual culture. Thinking about the different connotations of sex and romance among college students as compared with younger teenagers, I consider again why abstinence might seem an appealing solution for this older demographic.

To best understand the ongoing negotiations and nuances of the movement's appeal, it is worth noting that its terminology is both varied and significant.

Movement advocates often discuss *abstinence*, but some refer to *chastity* or *purity*.² Several of the college students I communicated with indicated a preference for the term chastity, which they defined as abstinence before marriage and fidelity within it and—they emphasized—which is different from celibacy. For these students, chastity seems to offer a term and a concept that is less negative and less temporary than abstinence (which is based on *not* having sex and is only relevant *before* marriage). Purity, which is often evoked in explicitly religious settings, is similarly positive and enduring; it signifies a valorized state as opposed to a mere practice of refusal. The privileging of the term abstinence is thus perplexing—and potentially revealing. An abstinence movement, rather than a chastity or purity movement, focuses explicitly on youth, as abstinence is the temporary, youthful stage of lifelong chastity.³ Additionally, in emphasizing the act of abstention, movement discourse aligns its project with a wider conservative critique of an “over-permissive culture”; thus the terminology implicitly places premarital sex in a paradigm of compulsive consumption and positions sexual abstinence as a critical form of moral restraint.⁴

² Some of the largest and most visible manifestations of the movement use the term abstinence. Abstinence-only education is prominent in popular discourse. There is also an Abstinence Clearinghouse that holds a national Abstinence Conference.

³ It is possible that the terms chastity and purity simply seem too old-fashioned; after all, the college students who explained chastity to me did so defensively, anticipating a potential critique or misunderstanding of the concept.

⁴ I want to note that “premarital sex” is not a neutral term, but rather one that presents sex within marriage as normative and marriage itself as inevitable.

Chapter One
**Sexual Revolution(s) and the Emergence of
the Abstinence Movement**

In this chapter I contextualize the contemporary abstinence movement in the history of sexual representation in the United States. I sketch a history of dominant sexual ideologies, giving particular attention to developments over the second half of the twentieth century. I explore the changing sexual climate and locate the formation and growth of the abstinence movement in relationship to historically and socially conditioned discourses on race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, a middle class was consolidated in Europe. It was defined in great part through a new ideology of gender and sexuality, which was linked to the separation of work from household production and the construction of the public and private as separate, gendered spheres. Men's and women's ostensibly different natures were held to suit them for complementary roles in the gendered division of labor: men were to be the economic providers for the nuclear family, and women the domestic caretakers. A man's ability to afford a wife who concentrated full-time on homemaking as well as the orderly, comfortable home she maintained became critical markers of class status. Domestic women themselves were morally esteemed and came to embody the classed ethic of sexual restraint in contrast to the imagined promiscuity of aristocratic and working-class women (Armstrong 1987).

The bourgeoisie carved out a space for themselves based on a claim to a superior ethic of restraint, foresight, and delayed gratification (Stocking 1987: 217).

They celebrated the values of modesty, frugality, regularity, and discretion (Armstrong 1987: 122). In this ethic sexuality was directly related to work and economics, and thus to the larger social order, and “one’s sexual behavior became more of a signifier of the ‘social self’, rather than an adjunct of a more eclectic and private eroticism” (Hawkes 1996: 39).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Victorian middle classes became lastingly associated with the ethic of sexual restraint. At the turn of the century Freudian theory psychologized Victorian sexual restraint as repressive, an excessively strict system of psycho-social controls that regulated sexuality by imposing silence on individuals with regard to desire. Since then, liberal sexual ideology has consistently positioned itself as a liberatory critique of sexual repression.

Foucault (1990) challenges what he calls this “repressive hypothesis”—the idea that there was a silencing around matters of sexuality during this era and that all those who spoke out about sex during or after this period were transgressing this repression. Rather, he asserts that bourgeois sexuality is itself a discursive phenomenon that brought about new ways of thinking and talking about sex, yet never erased sex from public or private discourses. Most scholars now agree that Victorian sexuality was far more nuanced and contradictory in practice than in ideology. But while the ideology of restraint may never have exhaustively regulated sexual practice, it has been and remains a highly influential trope. Sexual liberals imagine the denial of sexuality as an old-fashioned practice that stunts individual development. In contrast, for sexual conservatives, restraint of desire is a necessary

virtue that has gone into decline; they continue to exhort individuals—and women in particular— to exercise moral control over sexual conduct.

The bourgeois ideology of sex was reinflected over the nineteenth century as industrialization and resulting urban migration and immigration changed the American landscape. In both European and American cities, discourses of “domestic savagery” (Stocking 1987: 213) were projected onto the burgeoning urban working classes. In the United States, sexuality was mapped onto binaries of race as well as class: different sexual natures and regulatory capacities were ascribed to the white middle classes than to the lower classes and people of color.⁵ For white middle-class Northeasterners during the Industrial Revolution, society was particularly in flux (Horowitz 2006: vii). Members of this rising social class worked to position themselves as refined, moral, and in control of the passions. Women were targeted with literature that exhorted them to take responsibility for “establishing order and restraint” in the “moral center” of their homes (Horowitz 2006: 4). Middle-class people were expected to police their own sexuality, and the boundaries of what was acceptable narrowed. Monogamous, marital, and procreative sex was the only legitimate sex, implicitly marking homosexual activity and masturbation, as well as premarital sex, as deviant.

Narrowing the limits of appropriate sexuality was inextricably tied to middle-class concerns over social control and productivity. In contrast to agrarian parents in previous generations, urban middle-class parents “enjoyed far less control over their

⁵ The United States has a long history of conflating race and class. Constructions of the lower classes are generally raced as non-white, and the non-white middle classes are often rendered invisible. Stereotypes are built around an idea of white middle classes and non-white lower classes even when statistics speak otherwise.

children” and worried that they might not become “disciplined workers...[or that they might] deviate from adult notions of respectable behavior” (Horowitz 1996: 17-18). Sexual restraint became emblematic of and instrumental for the disciplinary virtues that the middle classes held to be necessary for economic and social success. Sexual abstinence helped to assuage worries about excessive sexuality’s potentially wasting energies that could otherwise be put to productive use (Stocking 1987: 216).

In conceiving of their own sexuality, middle-class people distinguished themselves from the lower classes. Victorian cultural critics, speculating on the close living—and sleeping—quarters of the urban poor, imagined sexuality among the lower classes and particularly people of color as overly public, excessive, and transgressive even to the point of incest. Their sexuality “was spoken of as barely distinguishable from animals” (Hawkes 1996: 44). The working classes—“a disturbing and alien phenomenon”—were spoken of in racial metaphors: “a race apart,” “a nomad race” (Stocking 1987: 213). This discourse positioned white middle-class people as inherently moral; the “partial fiction that was bourgeois sexual morality” depended on the construction of its counterpart, which often took the shape of a hypersexual poor woman of color (Hawkes 1996: 43-44). Such a figure is demonstrative of the discursive conflation of race and class, as well as the gendered asymmetry that held women to be responsible for upholding the sexual standards that in principle applied to both men and women.

Over the nineteenth century, sexuality increasingly became a public concern. The strict regulation of sexual conduct invited transgression of these moralized taboos. Sex was spilling out into polite society in such forms as prostitution and

pornography, and information on preventing conception and terminating unwanted pregnancies began to circulate covertly. While white middle-class people certainly engaged in illicit sexual practices, they projected them onto classed and raced “others” whose imagined transgressions were viewed as cause for concern. They worried “that modern society had facilitated what was in effect an ‘unnatural selection’ ...[with] the tendency of the intellectually fittest to control their fertility while the lower classes multiplied like rabbits” (Stocking 1987: 233). Bourgeois reformers also attacked “the age-old double standard of possessive patriarchy [that was used to] justify if not legitimize a certain amount of [men’s] premarital and even extramarital participation in a sexual underworld populated largely by lower-class women whose social situation, economic circumstances, and subcultural tradition did not sustain the image of angel innocence” (Stocking 1987: 200). Through this condemnation of prostitution, reformers criticized the sexual double standard in which men were thought to have an autonomous and physical sexuality and women a relational and emotional sexuality. The contentiousness of sexuality also mirrored anxieties about society as a whole; “[u]nbridled sexuality was both a concern in itself and a metaphor for the wider social pathology of the body social. Concerns about the social consequences of the mismatch between the massed and numerically dominant labouring classes and the promotion of middle-class values” heightened the construction of bourgeois sexuality as not only moral, but healthy, and thus unquestionably favorable (Hawkes 1996: 44).

Though sexual practices were always contradictory and complex, certain sexual ideals were established during the nineteenth century. Children were

considered innocent and asexual, women were expected to be pure and dependent on men, and heterosexual marriage was a universal goal. These models shaped and were shaped by their opposites: “marginal figures...[such as] the prostitute, the sexually precocious child, the sexually perverse adult and the sexual independent who transgressed increasingly narrow gender boundaries” (Hawkes 1996: 48-9). Certainly not all white middle-class people ascribed to Victorian sexual morality, and not all who nominally asserted their adherence lived up to its standards. But this regulatory model of sexuality was and is widely regarded as the norm for the Victorian era and served as a foil for the changing sexual norms of the twentieth century.

The nineteenth century in the United States saw the drawing of boundaries around sexuality, particularly along lines of race, class, and gender; over the twentieth century these boundaries were blurred significantly. These changing sexual norms set the scene for the contemporary abstinence movement. Abstinence advocates often position themselves as reacting to the sexual revolution, a hyperbolized reference to the 1960s and 1970s. However, some scholars argue that there was an earlier sexual revolution at the turn of the twentieth century, between approximately 1880 and 1920 (Luker 2006). While the Victorian era had constructed the asexuality of children in contrast to the sexuality of adults, Freudian theory at the turn of the century posited that sexuality began in infancy and that childhood entailed a series of sexual stages. New expert discourses constructed “adolescence” as a fraught transition between childhood and adulthood, and the figure of the adolescent became a symbolic location of cultural concerns about modern social order and citizenry (Lesko 2001: 6). Across

the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the sexuality of young people has remained a focus of interest and anxiety.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, adolescent boys and girls began to spend unchaperoned time together—a break from the homosocial norms of the past (Ullman 1997: 18). At first, middle-class people looked on scornfully as working-class boys and girls earned extra money in factories and spent it on new forms of urban heterosocial leisure. Boys' sexual indulgence was imagined to lead away from self-discipline and the ability to advance in work. Girls were newly labeled “at risk” because their new income gave them independence from their parents; they were thought to be particularly at risk of being “ruined” before marriage, a fate that was imagined to lead to prostitution (Luker 2006). But sex and gender relations were also changing among the middle classes. The importance of prolonged education to class status disposed both boys and girls to postpone marriage for schooling. These schools were increasingly coeducational, and boys and girls interacted more frequently, often without adult supervision. To some, the increased contacts between the sexes were cause for concern; like lower-class boys, middle-class boys seemed to be at risk of falling victim to sexual temptation instead of advancing their careers, a lapse which had negative implications for society as a whole.

By contrast, primarily female middle-class social reformers, known as social hygienists, saw and applauded a growing equality between men and women in many areas of life. But they also saw a persistent sexual double standard in which men were thought to have an autonomous sexuality that they could express more freely, while women were considered to have a relational, emotional sexuality. These reformers

believed that social problems “stemmed from a single source: the idea that because men and women are different, sexually and otherwise, they have different rights and obligations” (Luker 2006: 42), and they were among the first to publicly contest this sexual double standard. They took issue with the assumption of men’s need for regular sex, which they charged with promoting society’s tacit tolerance of prostitution. Believing that sexual and social equality were mutually implicated, these “reformers dreamed of establishing a world of gender and sexual equality, a world where the ‘single standard of sexual behavior’ would replace the hated double standard.” But significantly, “[t]he sexual conduct of women, not men, was to be the template” (Luker 2006: 55). Whereas Victorian ideology had put more emphasis on women’s sexual restraint, social hygienists argued that “male sexuality, like female sexuality, could and must be controlled” (Luker 2006: 56).

These reformers were struck by the increasing ability to separate sex from procreation through contraceptive practices that were being more widely adopted. They were concerned that this separation of sex from procreation threatened marriage. The social hygienists championed the idea of sex education in public schools as a means of teaching that marriage and sex go together, creating intimate, loving marriages. Their ideas reflected the new ideal of marriage as a companionate partnership between spouses and of home as a space of shared pleasures.

Social hygienists intended to advance the case for gender equality, but their model of sex education remained highly classed, explicitly teaching middle-class ideals of sexual discipline, social and economic productivity, delayed childbearing, and marriage—a trajectory that presupposes education and access to a professional-

managerial career and is largely beyond the reach of working-class people. Additionally, across class lines, this new emphasis on companionate marriage and sexual pleasure had the opposite of its intended effect, leading to more sexual experimentation before marriage rather than to the containment of sex within marriage. Premarital sex—at least with a fiancé—became much more common, though it was still improper to admit it in polite society (Luker 2006).

The 1960s and 1970s brought a second sexual revolution that profoundly challenged and altered sexual norms and practices. Where the first sexual revolution had separated sex from procreation, this second revolution separated sex from marriage (Luker 2006). Premarital sexual ideals and practices shifted to close the gender gap, but contrary to the goals of the social hygienists, men and women were abiding by the traditionally male model of sexual conduct. The era of “free love” brought to the mainstream not a relational, emotional sexuality, traditionally associated with women, but an autonomous one in which both men and women were ideally free to pursue sexual pleasure and make individual choices about sex. The legalization of oral contraceptive pills and abortion both reflected and reinforced this societal shift, giving women more choice regarding when or whether to marry and have children.

Just as rates of premarital sex began to converge across gender lines, so too did they converge across lines of race and class. The excessive sexuality historically projected onto the working classes—and particularly working-class women—was positively valorized and extended to the middle classes. With this change in practice came a change in ideology. Though premarital sex had certainly occurred in previous

decades, it was stigmatized. For the baby boomers, however, it was increasingly acceptable—even expected—to engage in sex before marriage. Sexuality and sexual regulation had become a public matter during the nineteenth century. While this second sexual revolution also brought sex to public attention, it celebrated sex rather than restricting it. Within a romantic construction of the person as a unique, expressive being, an individual’s sexual behavior was defined as a private and deeply personal choice, not to be dictated or judged by a repressive society. An explicitly feminist ideology also influenced this sexual revolution, linking the celebration of individual choice with the feminist emphasis on consent and self-determination.

For many, these changes opened doors. Sex, marriage, and raising children were now choices to be made by individuals rather than a socially prescribed life course. But others were quick to point to the limits of change in sexual ideology and practice. For while the expansion of choice around sex, marriage, and family benefited many, it left others disappointed. As Luker writes, “the losers [in the sexual revolution] were women who looked forward to marriage and family as the most enticing and life-affirming future” (2006: 82). While the middle classes enjoyed expanding sexual freedom, the working classes sometimes suffered as a result of sexual liberalization. For example, when birth control became a woman’s responsibility, working-class women had fewer options for managing the diminished societal pressure on men to marry them if they became pregnant.⁶ Thus while birth

⁶ Even today, middle-class women are more likely to use birth control and to abort an unplanned pregnancy, though lower-class women have more abortions overall. Young lower-class women may have both less to lose (in terms of educational or employment opportunities) and more to gain (in terms of social status by becoming young mothers) than middle-class women.

rates among highly educated women did not change in response to increased rates of premarital sex, poor women's unwed births tripled (Luker 2006: 81).

Throughout the twentieth century, sexual differences and stereotypes were blurred, and the sexual expression once disparagingly associated with the lower classes and people of color was extended to the middle classes. Sexual norms in the United States did not follow a clear-cut evolutionary trajectory from repression to free expression, but the general trend of sexual ideology was one of liberalization, and these changes did not go uncontested. Permissiveness in sexual practices and attitudes disturbed moral conservatives, and they mobilized in efforts to reverse these social changes. They attacked ostensibly immoral sexual behavior as symptomatic of a larger moral crisis. Focusing on young people, they hoped to reestablish premarital abstinence as the societal norm. Though premarital sexual abstinence is far from a new concept—as it harks back to Victorian sexual ideology—the abstinence movement is a recent phenomenon.

The most pervasive manifestation of the contemporary abstinence movement is abstinence-only education, and it is with education that the movement began. As mentioned earlier, sex education had been introduced in a great number of high schools in the early twentieth century. In the 1960s, sex education became more widespread, and its approach was changing. Educators recognized the increase in premarital sexual activity across gender, class, and race lines and shifted their strategy from promoting marriage as an ideal to emphasizing risk reduction—teaching students practical ways to reduce their chance of unplanned pregnancy or sexually

transmitted infections (STIs).⁷ This new sex education was considered a pragmatic response to a changing sexual reality, but moral conservatives understood it as an endorsement of premarital sexual activity. They resented sex education as a violation of parental rights and fought to eliminate it from public schools. By the end of the 1970s, however, conservative groups abandoned their efforts to eliminate sex education and instead began to fight over its content (Doan 2008: 27).

The conservative political groups involved in the abstinence movement are frequently aligned with the Christian Right, a strong political force associated with evangelical Christianity. Many people assume that the Christian Right grew in response to the legalization of abortion.⁸ But whatever its origins, once the Christian Right entered the political scene, they gained political momentum and set out to bring legal change to sex education.

Conservative groups took on this task at the federal level and passed the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) in 1981. AFLA was the first federal legislation that dealt explicitly with sex education, and, as such, it opened up possibilities for more funding in the future. AFLA passed with a stated goal of preventing unmarried teen pregnancy through “family-centered” programs that would “promote chastity and self-discipline” (Saul 1998). In order to get the bill passed, proponents had compromised, however, and much of AFLA’s funding was directed to support

⁷ Many of my sources and informants used the term “STDs”—sexually transmitted diseases. I prefer the term “STIs”—sexually transmitted infections—as it more accurately describes their “equal opportunity” nature; while some people are predisposed to disease, anyone can get an infection. However, in some cases, when directly paraphrasing, I have retained the term “STDs” in the text.

⁸ According to Herzog, however, whereas “conservative leaders now pretend that the Religious Right was born in reaction to the legalization of abortion in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973...[it] was born in reaction to the Internal Revenue Service’s effort in 1975 to revoke the tax-exempt status of the Christian conservative Bob Jones University, owing to its racially discriminatory policies.” That evangelical leaders were initially divided on the abortion issue supports this argument (2008: 123).

services for pregnant and parenting teens, rather than to preventive abstinence education (Doan 2008: 28).

After the passage of AFLA, sex education remained contentious. Particularly with the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, many people saw a crucial need for a harm reduction model of sex education that would promote and destigmatize “safer sex.” Additionally, many early abstinence programs being taught in public schools were religiously based. As these programs circulated in schools, opponents responded. In 1987, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought a case to federal court claiming that AFLA’s funding of religious programs violated the separation of church and state. The ACLU won the case, but the Supreme Court reversed the decision in 1988. This further appeal was settled out of court in 1993, with the judge declaring AFLA constitutional on the stipulation of four rules: that programs using AFLA funds must

(1) not include religious references, (2) be medically accurate, (3) respect the “principle of self-determination” regarding contraceptive referral for teenagers, and (4) not allow grantees to use church sanctuaries for their programs or to give presentations in parochial schools during school hours (Doan 2008: 50).

In the public and political realm, conservatives recognized that abstinence education was an insufficient issue for mobilizing public support, and they widened their strategy to encompass the broader goals of moral conservatism. In the 1992 presidential race between George Bush and Bill Clinton, moral conservatives rallied behind Bush with explicitly anti-gay rhetoric. In constructing homosexuality as a menace to society, they implicitly drew support for a model of heterosexual marriage (Herzog 2008: 61). Conservative groups brought together parents to fight against the

inclusion of “abnormal” sexual activity—homosexuality and masturbation—in sex education, and they used this reasoning to demand that schools teach abstinence-only (Herzog 2008: 83). These local efforts had some successes with individual schools and districts. Their national efforts were unsuccessful—Clinton won the election—but this opposition of homo- and heterosexuality continued to inform their future political efforts. The Christian Right also began to strategically secularize their message to appeal to Americans’ increasingly liberal attitudes about sex (Herzog 2008: 69).

During Clinton’s presidency, welfare reform was a major topic of concern. Cultural critics called attention to the female single-headed households that had come to dominate the welfare rolls. Though many of these female welfare recipients had both child-care responsibilities and only low-paying employment opportunities, they were constructed as undeserving and unmotivated. Welfare was seen as promoting dependency on the state by discouraging marriage and encouraging teen and out-of-wedlock childbearing (Doan 2008: 29). Anti-welfare rhetoric centered on “images of family dysfunction and dependency—including teen pregnancy—and argued for a new definition of compassion” (Doan 2008: 31). Unlike feminists, who were concerned with women’s economic dependence on men, welfare critics only problematized economic dependence on the state. Discourse on the “culture of poverty,” which had circulated since the 1950s, promoted the idea that dependency could be “learned” from generation to generation. Welfare was thought to perpetuate a lack of values among the poor, and single motherhood was held to be both a cause and an effect of this moral failure. Such theories of intergenerational poverty ignored

the structural conditions that limit class mobility, defining poverty as the outcome of cultural factors alone.

The dominant discourse on welfare was highly skewed. Most white voters imagined welfare recipients to be predominantly women of color, envisioning a “Welfare Queen” who exploited and profited from public funds. While a higher percentage of black and Latina women were indeed poor, the majority of welfare recipients were white (Herzog 2008: 121). Similarly, teen pregnancies were thought to be a problem primarily of girls of color, when most teen pregnancies were actually among white girls (Doan 2008: 37). This distorted image both reflected and reinforced stereotypes of immorality and weak work ethic among people of color.

Condemnation of the welfare system did not come only from conservatives. But moral conservatives made the strategic move of linking welfare and sex education; “[a]bstinence-only education became cast as an easy, and moral, solution for a litany of public health and social ailments: unwanted pregnancy, disease prevention, and poverty reduction” (Doan 2008: 11). Conservative groups promoted a plan of cutting off welfare money and instating abstinence-only education as a means of preventing unmarried pregnancy (Doan 2008: 29).

Direct attempts to establish abstinence-only education programs across the country were not well received by the majority of Congress. Conservatives were ultimately successful by using “morality stealth politics” (Doan 2008) to include legislation on abstinence-only education in a larger reform bill. At the last stage of revision for a welfare reform bill, two Oklahoma Congressmen pushed Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to include Title V, which sanctioned \$50 million per year

between 1998 and 2002 explicitly for abstinence-only education (Doan 2008: 33).

Title V was included in the “miscellaneous provisions” of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which was not voted on again in the House after this additional provision. When PRWORA reached President Clinton, he signed it into law on August 22, 1996.

The institution of this act solidified the raced and classed assumptions circulating in popular and political discourse. Through PRWORA, “[w]elfare and abstinence-only sex education [were] wed in law...because of the perceived need to protect white American teens while controlling racially ‘other’ teens, who are constructed as both hypersexual and likely to become welfare dependent” (Doan 2008: 38-9). Additionally, through Title V, specific qualities were established in order for programs to qualify for federal funding, and the definition of abstinence education was set:

For the purposes of this section, the term “abstinence education” means an educational or motivational program which—

- (A) has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;
- (B) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school age children;
- (C) teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;
- (D) teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;
- (E) teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
- (F) teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society;
- (G) teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and
- (H) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity (Doan 2008: 39).

Title V legalized a definition of abstinence that is inextricably tied to race, class, and heterosexism. Statutes (F) and (H) speak to the connection with welfare, clearly alluding to class and economic dependence on the state, and these classed ideas about welfare in the United States are also inevitably about race. Abstinence education also hinges on a future resolution—marriage—and statute (D), in particular, assumes heterosexuality and universal desire for marriage.

States requesting Title V money must contribute three dollars for every four dollars they request from this federal source—a stipulation that turns the allotted \$250 million into up to \$437 million over five years. All states excluding California accepted Title V money at some point, though some states tried to use these funds for more general projects such as mentoring or after-school programs. The National Coalition for Abstinence Education (NCAE), which was formed in 1997, criticized these indirect uses of Title V money, prompting President George W. Bush to push for an additional abstinence program: Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) (Doan 2008: 40-1).

While President Clinton signed abstinence funding into law with the broader intent of reforming the welfare system, Bush's presidency, beginning in 2001, ushered in eight years of unambiguous support for abstinence-only education. Approved by Congress in 2001, CBAE provides funds directly to community organizations—including faith-based organizations—without state involvement or approval. The funds allocated by CBAE are contingent on the strictest definition of abstinence education, including statutes A-H of Title V and stressing marriage and “moral purity” (Doan 2008: 41). Additionally, in 2002 when Title V's five years ran

out, the Personal Responsibility, Work, and Family Protection Bill reauthorized welfare reform and, with it, \$50 million toward abstinence-only education for each of five more years. President Bush's support for abstinence education was clear; in 2006, his administration issued a statement reminding states that they were encouraged to use Title V money to promote abstinence not just for teenagers, but also for unmarried adults between nineteen and twenty-nine years of age. Addressing still-high rates of unmarried childbearing, the Bush administration urged states to target groups of people "who are most likely to bear children out of wedlock" (Herzog 2008: 120), a statement tinged with the raced implications of anti-welfare rhetoric. Despite Bush's efforts, most abstinence programs continue to target teenagers.

Currently, federal funding for abstinence-only education is available through three sources: AFLEA, Title V, and CBAE. States are not required to accept this money, nor must they teach abstinence. However, federal funding is seen, understandably, as federal endorsement, making sex education a contentious subject across the country. States, districts, and individual schools are all involved in deciding whether students will receive sex education, and often it comes down to the individual teacher. Several states have now refused federal abstinence money, while others have limited the amount they use.

Generally, sex education is described in terms of three types: abstinence-only, abstinence-plus, and comprehensive. Abstinence-only education, as described above, portrays abstinence as the only acceptable sexual behavior for unmarried people. Although most abstinence-only programs claim to include information on

contraception and prevention, this information is only in the form of (arguably inflated) failure rates. Abstinence-plus (also called abstinence-based or abstinence-centered) stresses abstinence, but gives some attention to discussing contraception and prevention. Rather than seeing this model as a compromise, most abstinence advocates dislike what seems to them to be a contradictory message. Comprehensive sex education includes the benefits of abstinence, but provides in-depth information on contraception and prevention.

Abstinence advocates claim that comprehensive sex education encourages teenagers to have sex. Comprehensive sex education, however, works from the perspective that students who have access to information about sexual health and negotiating sexual relationships will make educated decisions when they do decide to have sex—whenever that may be. Studies on the effectiveness of all types of sex education dot the media, but often the same results are used by opposing sides, each framing statistics to flatter their educational model and ideology.

Education is the means by which the abstinence movement gained a significant political and cultural presence, but abstinence-only education is not the movement's only initiative. Virginity pledges, an invention of the 1990s, also play a prominent role in the movement. In 1987, the Christian Life Education Project was founded, and out of this grew True Love Waits. Through True Love Waits, teenagers sign commitment cards pledging to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. The Silver Ring Thing, founded in 1996, expanded on the True Love Waits model of virginity pledges, but instead of having teenagers sign cards, the Silver Ring Thing encourages them to wear rings as a physical reminder of their commitment to

abstinence until marriage. The Silver Ring Thing accepted federal funding between 2003 and 2005, at which point the ACLU sued the Department of Health and Human Services with the claim that the Silver Ring Thing was promoting a religious message with federal dollars. Silver Ring Thing chose not to amend its program to comply with federal demands, and now uses only private funds (ACLU 2006). I will explore the Silver Ring Thing ethnographically in Chapter Three.

With abstinence education established in a great number of schools across the country, the abstinence movement also continues to grow in its more informal programming. The Silver Ring Thing has a “rollout plan” that aims to enact a “cultural shift” by getting rings onto the fingers of twenty percent of the adolescent population in the United States in the next few years. Students at some of the most prestigious universities have launched nominally secular clubs promoting premarital abstinence. Abstinence advocates host Purity Balls and purity retreats primarily for adolescent girls. But abstinence is not the only form of sexual culture that is public and contentious.

An unprecedented number of sexual images, themes, and advice flood through mainstream media. Sexualized toys and clothing are marketed to ever younger (usually female) children. Popular television shows, movies, and advertisements have taken to heart the idea that “sex sells,” and even People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) uses highly sexual images of women’s bodies to promote a message of animal rights. The internet has eliminated significant barriers to viewing pornography, and it is widely consumed by young people. Magazines recycle the same sex tips every month, promising infinitely greater pleasure. Popular discourse

suggests that we deserve not just sex, but great sex, and a healthy and happy—and orgasmic—“sex life” is considered nearly essential to a fulfilling life in general.

Critiques of a hypersexual culture do not come only from sexual conservatives. Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005) critically analyzes the phenomenon of women participating in “raunch culture”—surrounding themselves with a view of sexuality influenced by the traditionally male-dominated sex industry—as ultimately objectifying and demeaning both themselves and other women. She argues that the feminist goals of sexual equality were not realized as planned, and that so-called post-feminist culture has not achieved what it claims to have done. Levy is critical of what she understands to be a narrow and singular understanding of sexuality, as well as the equation of women’s sexual power with women’s overall power. Feminist cultural critics condemn many of the same hypersexual cultural forms as those criticized in Carol Platt Liebau’s *Prude: How the Sex-Obsessed Culture Damages Girls (and America, Too!)* (2007).

Widespread sexual dissonances and anxieties today are seen largely through a focus on teenagers and young adults. Contemporary discussions of sexuality have fixated on what is termed the “hookup culture”—a tendency toward uncommitted sexual activity among youth. In the media, and within a growing genre of pop psychology, many journalists, therapists, and authors are exploring the putative consequences of this sexual culture. Critics of this trend bemoan the disappearance of dating and relationships in favor of casual, uncommitted sex.

The public debate on contemporary sexuality is far from resolved. Interestingly, whatever their positions, most people debating sexual politics see

themselves as the underdog, still fighting for their voices to be heard. Self-proclaimed “sex-positive” feminists speak out against the “sex-negative” world around them, and moral conservatives perceive themselves as a threatened minority resisting a hypersexual, immoral culture. It is unclear whose views set the scene and the language for this struggle. Some say that abstinence is discussed in a liberal framework of harm reduction (Luker 2006), while others note that many comprehensive sex educators “begin with the premise that abstinence is surely a worthy ideal,” though one that should be supplemented with information about contraception and prevention (Herzog 2008: 124).

In regard to gender and sexual liberalization, there are critics on all sides; some say that the shift to sexual equality is incomplete, while others claim it has gone too far. Sexual liberals are quick to point out the persistence of a double standard, such as the different implications of men’s and women’s promiscuity. Sexual conservatives, on the other hand, argue that women “having sex like men” is contrary to and subverts women’s fundamental needs and hopes. And while explicit critiques (from all sides) along gender lines are still common, raced and classed stereotypes persist in much more subtle ways.

Abstinence was never just about sex. The roots of the contemporary abstinence movement are largely Christian. So, too, are they white and middle-class. Emerging in response to a liberalizing sexual revolution, the movement positioned itself as a sexual counterculture, a moral resistance to a dissolute mainstream culture. The abstinence movement’s historic entanglements with religion, race, class, gender, and heterosexism continue to influence its contemporary discourse and practice.

Chapter Two **Strategies and Compromises in Movement Discourse**

In this chapter I explore the contemporary abstinence movement's self-presentation. I outline the movement's main arguments and justifications, and I examine the strategies and compromises that abstinence advocates make with other discourses. I consider the rhetoric of choice and individualism and the discursive shift from moral to instrumental justifications based on health, emotions, and pseudo-science. I discuss how the movement presents itself as "cool" in an effort to appeal to teenagers.

Through these combined strategies, the abstinence movement pursues a three-pronged approach to mobilizing support, providing potential participants with a religious and moral grounding, seemingly scientific arguments, and an emotional appeal to fears of not belonging and not being desired. I also consider dissenting and contradictory voices within the movement, complexities that are symptomatic of the ambiguities and contradictions of the contemporary abstinence movement and its ongoing negotiations with sexual culture.

Religious and Moral Roots and the Definition of Abstinence

Arguments for abstinence are many and they are presented in complex ways. As I discussed in the previous chapter, abstinence-only education came about as a conservative solution to out-of-wedlock childbearing and poverty, the supposed symptoms of an increasingly immoral—consumerist, individualistic—culture. These

arguments continue to circulate today, but the references to raced and classed subjects are rarely as explicit. What remains at the heart of the abstinence movement is a religious and moral valorization of marriage. Rather than insisting on the need to *contain* sex to marriage, abstinence advocates are more likely to *celebrate* sex within marriage, a subtle but significant shift in emphasis that casts premarital sex as antithetical to true sexual fulfillment.

The movement advocates for sexual abstinence until marriage, and the value of marriage is as central—if not more so—to the conversation as is premarital abstinence. In *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (2005), Lauren Winner writes, “What sits at the center of Christian sexual ethics is not a negative view of sex.” She explains, “[T]he Christian vision of marriage is not, at its most concise, merely ‘no sex before marriage.’ Rather, the heart of the Christian story about sex is a vigorously positive statement: sex was created for marriage” (2005: 25). Not only was sex created *for* marriage, but sex—and specifically and explicitly coitus—is crucial in actively creating legitimate marriage.⁹

In Christian explanations, sex is the “language of the body,” the physical manifestation of marriage vows. Sex between a man and a woman is understood as modeling the relationship between humans and God, and sex is only “real” insofar as it is free, total, faithful, and fruitful (Eden 2006: 68). Much Christian abstinence

⁹ In an article entitled “Why Marriage is Inherently Heterosexual,” (2008) Patrick Lee argues that to be “genuinely married,” a couple must be open to bearing and raising children together and must “perform the conduct by which they become biologically one, conduct that...might result in procreation.” He grants the title of “genuine marriage” to infertile couples because “their act has still biologically united them,” but denies marriage to same-sex couples, young couples, and “opposite-sex couples who (because of impotence) cannot consummate their union....” By excluding impotent couples and including infertile couples, Lee quite literally claims that marriage cannot exist without coitus. Lee critiques explanations of marriage as too based on emotions (on love, rather than commitment), but his definition hardly seems holistic, as it is based on a singularly defined sexual act.

rhetoric points to Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body, centered on the idea that "sex is meant to be unitive, procreative, and sacramental" (Winner 2005: 65-6). These arguments are explicitly religious, and abstinence advocates acknowledge that they will not persuade everyone. Winner writes that her book is not an attempt to "convert the broader culture to chastity," but to support unmarried people "trying to live in a Christian moral universe" (2005: 24).

Even when advocates do not justify abstinence in religious terms, they commonly rely upon moral absolutes. When I communicated by email with Jonathan, a student leader of Princeton's Anscombe Society, he explained his reasons for supporting premarital abstinence as follows:

For me, abstinence is a lifestyle choice founded on fundamental moral principles, and supported by evidence and reasons from various disciplines, including medicine, history, sociology, psychology, philosophy.... If sex is a consummation of the unity between husband and wife, an act that confirms the mutual commitment between a man and woman on the spiritual, emotional, and physical planes, then fidelity within a marriage is necessary and morally good. Abstinence is simply fidelity to a future spouse.

Jonathan appeals to an absolute moral code for which justification is unnecessary.

The alternative explanations he offers—the "various disciplines" that support a belief in abstinence—are merely supplementary.

The abstinence movement works from an understanding of sex as "sacred," whereas its liberal critics deem sex "natural" (Luker 2006). As a sacred activity, the movement asserts, sex has an absolute value and must be set apart, protected against profanation, through its restriction to marriage. The practice of abstaining marks premarital sex as profane and binds participants together as those who respect the sacred character of marital sex.

In our email exchange, Brandon of Princeton's Anscombe Society wrote to me about his "frustration...with the nonchalance shown toward the very serious social, moral, and health issues that surround the topic of sex." Within the movement, sex is supremely meaningful, but it is also self-evidently so; its moral value is intrinsic and not subject to debate. As Jonathan wrote in an opinion piece, the movement hopes to "[promote] a vision of sexuality that does justice to the dignity of the human person" (Hwang 2008). Abstinence as a religious and moral stance requires little justification because advocates understand it, together with the purity it preserves, as both a positive state in itself and as a ritual technique for preserving the sanctity of marriage. This view runs contrary to liberal constructions of sexuality in relation to pleasure, or more precisely, it constructs immediate pleasure as a danger to future well-being.

For abstinence advocates, abstaining from sex until marriage is inherently good and moral conduct. It is not simple, however, to determine what abstinence actually entails: from what exactly are participants abstaining? Though some advocates may reference the Theology of the Body, the movement has no official doctrine. Movement discourse often shies away from drawing clear, unambiguous boundaries between licit and illicit sexual conduct, and thus one of the most common questions from potential and active participants of the movement is: "How far is too far?" In an article on *Boundless*, a website for twentysomethings sponsored by Focus on the Family, John Thomas (2006) tackles this question. He writes, "...we're not asking the right question. The question should not be 'how far is too far?' but rather, 'what builds up, honors, and promotes growth?' If we would only ask and answer

that, we'll be so far from the lines we need not worry." Movement leaders try to avoid giving specific answers, worrying that participants will go as close to a given boundary as possible:

Everybody wants to know where the line is between "OK-with-God" and "not-OK-with-God" on the physical intimacy scale. Different Boundless writers have various opinions on it, but no matter where we draw the line, someone will want to know how close to that line is OK. If I say, for instance, no touching...below the belt, then someone will want to know how close to "the belt" is OK (and assume that "above" is fine). If I say, no passionate kissing, then someone will say, "define passionate." If I say, no holding hands, then someone will say I'm crazy (Thomas 2006).

Though often shying away from specifics, abstinence advocates recommend abstaining from all sexual activity that will lead to the desire for further sexual activity, which could potentially go "too far." In this view, all sexual activity leads inevitably to intercourse, which is biblically forbidden before marriage. Participants are expected not to "ignite desire" that they are prohibited from fulfilling. In *And the Bride Wore White: Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity* (1999), Dannah Gresh outlines nine "Steps to Physical Intimacy"; eye contact, talking, holding hands, hands on shoulders and waist, kissing on the cheek or softly on the lips, open-mouthed passionate kissing, petting while clothed, "experimental nakedness," and sexual intercourse (90). While she does not mark a specific point as prohibited, she asks her readers to "draw a firm black line above the step where you will stop any type of physical contact" before marriage (91). After "prayerfully consider[ing]" whether God would approve of this behavior, readers are also encouraged to draw a dotted line one step lower: this dotted line to be crossed only after engagement.

Sometimes abstinence advocates do provide a straightforward answer to the question of appropriate boundaries. On the Pure Love Club's "Chastity Q&A,"

participants are told: “don’t touch what you don’t got,” advice which playfully prohibits teenagers from touching their (opposite sexed) partner’s genitals.

Alternatively, they are advised to stay clothed and stay vertical, as a young woman at the Silver Ring Thing recommended. Some explicitly draw the line at kissing, saying that “passionate kissing” is too much before marriage. There is even a growing contingent of people who save their first kiss until after their wedding vows. Though this position is not pushed on others, it is commonly held up as a laudable example. On the whole, the impression that movement leaders give is that they wish teenagers would internalize appropriate boundaries as common sense.

While many critics of the movement believe its expectations are too stringent, some proponents of abstinence voice an even stricter position. Joshua Harris is one such person. His book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (1997) outlines “a new attitude toward romance and relationships” in which dating without the specific and pressing goal of marriage is both wasteful and harmful to a person’s time, emotions, spirituality, and future marriage. Harris dismisses the idea that dating and relationships can teach a person about what he or she wants out of interpersonal intimacy and advocates that we embrace our single years by abstaining from romance as well as sex. (He also advises “courtship” with the goal of marriage in place of contemporary “dating.”) University Unity women in Amy Wilkins’s ethnography of youth cultures (2008) also adhere to this “romantic abstinence.” Abstaining from romantic involvement as well as from sex allows participants to sidestep “temptation” by avoiding sexual situations altogether.

Another key component of the contemporary abstinence movement is the idea of “secondary virginity.” Also known as “born-again virginity,” this is a Christian concept in origin, but it is used in the same secular contexts as abstinence in general. The movement maintains that regardless of their sexual histories, all unmarried people should be sexually abstinent from now until their wedding days. Teenagers are told that “it is never too late” to “save” sex for marriage. Advocates claim that premarital sexual activity is at once utterly immoral and damaging and—at the same time—something that can be both forgiven and overcome if a person is dedicated to “starting over.” I found this idea to be confusing and contradictory, at first, but this is likely due to my distance from the evangelical narrative of salvation in which no matter the sin, one can always be saved.

Discursive Strategies in the Abstinence Movement

One of the abstinence movement’s most salient strategies is the adoption of a rhetoric of individualism and choice. With the liberalization of sexuality over the last few decades, regulating sexual conduct became a personal responsibility, strongly linked with ideals of self-expression and self-actualization. The feminist movement’s insistence on mutual consent notably took from the public a right to ordain and legitimize sexual activity (such as through legal marriage) and emphatically placed that requirement of consent solely with the participating sexual partners. As premarital sex lost its social stigma and became a socially recognized alternative to abstinence until marriage, the abstinence movement could not plausibly deny its

existence without losing credibility. Thus movement leaders made the strategic decision to construct abstinence as one choice among many—though it is a uniquely privileged one. Abstinence is presented as the only correct and moral “choice” in contrast to a sensationalized alternative of immoral promiscuity. The abstinence movement claims to work within an ethos of sexual choice, encouraging people to “choose abstinence.”

This is, however, a loaded appropriation of “choice.” In contrast to liberal discourse, the movement codes premarital abstinence as the only morally correct choice. Proponents of abstinence reject liberal pluralism in which individuals negotiate among an array of equally valid choices based on the particularities of their situations. In adopting the language of choice, movement leaders are in some ways attempting to co-opt liberal notions of self-determination through sexual expression. In the movement’s version of this narrative, having premarital sex is strongly linked with low self-esteem, and only marital sex can provide true fulfillment. Additionally, the movement’s employment of choice differs from liberal and feminist interpretations that understand sexual choices and decisions as ongoing: happening with every act, every partner, every time. By contrast, a choice to abstain from premarital sex is to be made one time and then upheld with conviction until marriage. Participants are not expected or encouraged to negotiate their sexual choices and boundaries as they change and grow; the only event that permits a change in behavior is marriage.

In movement discourse the choice to abstain from premarital sex (and sometimes even dating and romance) is positioned as moral, smart, and mature.

Abstinence advocates evoke “self-control” as an unquestionably good capacity, a sign and instrument of moral virtue. Such a framing of abstinence defines premarital sex as impulsive and irrational—symptomatic of an inability to control oneself. When I spoke by phone with Andrea, a student leader of Arizona State University’s New Sexual Revolution, she told me, “It’s almost degrading to think that it’s just some urge that we can’t control because we’re not rational beings.... That to me is just really distasteful.” She later spoke about her fiancé’s reasons for abstaining from sex, deriding “the idea that we expect guys to be looking at pornography or that they can’t help it, they have these urges or whatever, or that that’s just how guys are.” She described these ideas as “completely degrading and completely wrong. It’s almost counter-Renaissance...when we talk about having these urges we can’t control. That’s completely contrary to thinking of humans as rational and as different from animals.” Defining premarital sex as symptomatic of indiscipline and abstinence as reflecting the triumph of self-control constructs this choice as a marker of maturity. Young people who do engage in premarital sex are assumed to lack foresight, to be unable to defer immediate gratification for a more fulfilling future. Such an ideology harks back to binaries of civilized versus savage people.

In addition to referring to abstinence as a choice, other strategic and rhetorical efforts are designed to make the movement’s message resonate with teenagers. In much of movement discourse there is a tendency to abandon the core claim of abstinence as a moral end in itself in favor of arguments that instrumentalize abstinence as a means to a productive or physical end. One of the most prevalent versions of this strategy is the focus on the health risks of sex.

The strategic focus on health is a direct reaction to the growth of “safer sex” discourse in sex education. By the 1970s, proponents of sex education took on an attitude of “risk reduction” that acknowledged premarital sexual behavior and aimed “to make that sex safer rather than denounce it” (Luker 2006: 83-4). Safer sex, along with mutual consent, is at the crux of liberal discourse of sexuality. Abstinence advocates are critical of this focus, arguing that emphasizing contraception and protection reduces sex to something merely physical and treats sex as morally neutral or even positive—a key dimension of self-expression—with the only potential issues being unplanned pregnancy or infection. And yet even as social conservatives accuse safer sex advocates of ignoring crucial aspects of sexuality, much of abstinence rhetoric has shifted to focus on health risks as a compelling justification for avoiding premarital sex.

When advocates of abstinence join the debate regarding safer sex, they often find themselves selling abstinence as the *best* contraception and the *best* STI protection. What is, to the movement, an absolute distinction between right and wrong is presented in terms of degree, with protected sex as better than unprotected sex, but still less effective than abstinence. Like their opponents, abstinence advocates quantify the effectiveness of abstinence, hailing it as the only method that is 100 percent effective at preventing unplanned pregnancy and STI transmission. Safer sex methods and technologies are then compared to this standard, and—of course—none can compete. Abstinence advocates also tend to cite far more pessimistic statistics about the efficacy of safer sex technologies and practices in reducing health risks than do proponents of comprehensive sex education. For example, at the Silver Ring

Thing, two of the speakers told a crowd of middle and high school students that condoms reduce the risk of STI transmission by fifty percent or less. Federally funded abstinence-only education programs speak of safer sex methods and technologies only in the context of their failure rates. Sexual liberals find these statistics maddening, and there is little done to agree on numbers. For sexual conservatives, “the values are more important than the facts” (Luker 2006: 31).

Yet the focus on health risks in abstinence rhetoric dilutes these values. Pam Stenzel is a popular abstinence speaker who gives religious and public school assemblies. The secular version of her program works within the framework of safer sex education—she provides the “facts” and stresses that teenagers must make choices for themselves. She spends a major portion of her one-hour program “Sex Still Has a Price Tag” giving statistics and recounting anecdotes that emphasize the high risk of physical consequences—pregnancy, but mostly STIs—from premarital sex. She positions abstinence as a means to the desirable end of physical health and happy marriage rather than as morally superior conduct.

Another strategic move in abstinence discourse is to focus on the emotional risks of premarital sex. Traditional constructions of “purity” equated women’s virginal status quite explicitly with higher moral value. Contemporary abstinence discourse perpetuates this equation, but frames abstinence as a means of protecting young women’s self-esteem. Advocates construct abstinence as less about preserving one’s reputation for others, and more about preserving one’s own sense of worth. Sexually active young people are at risk not only of being socially ostracized, but of losing their self-respect as well.

Nearly all these emotion-based narratives are structured by gender asymmetry. In one realization of a pervasive double standard, men are supposedly tempted by sex, while women are tempted by romance and emotional connection (Wilkins 2006). Like Wilkins's Unity women, a pastor at the Purity Ball I attended warned participants against getting into "dysfunctional" and harmful relationships that would lower their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Pop psychology books such as *Unhooked* (2007) and *Unprotected* (2006) tell stories of young women who have sex in the hopes that they will be loved and end up emotionally hurt as a result. At the Silver Ring Thing, girls were consistently portrayed as emotional and upset during and in the aftermath of breakups, while boys appeared detached and unaffected. During one skit, a female actor exclaimed, "I gave you my virginity!" in a way that seemed to mean, "I love you, and I thought you loved me."

Besides linking premarital sex with sadness and disappointment, the movement associates it with guilt and shame. Abstinence discourse speaks of all sex outside marriage as using each another's bodies, as inherently lacking in emotional connection, and as sure to cause devastating emotional consequences. Of the abstinent college women in Wilkins's study, those who were previously sexually active are vocal about the shame they feel about their past experiences. For them, "the claim to sexual purity requires redemption...[and redemption] happens, in part, through shame" (2008: 137). Abstinence advocates articulate this shame as a sign that premarital sex is a distortion of young people's true nature, an inauthentic mode of conduct adopted to impress others. At the Silver Ring Thing, a young woman characterized her prior sexual activity as "pretend[ing] to be something [she] wasn't."

The movement constructs premarital sex as both a cause and an effect of poor self-image and inauthentic conduct.

The movement also bargains with emotions by promising that spouses who enter marriage having abstained will have a more loving, emotionally rich, and sexually gratifying relationship. According to movement discourse, people who have premarital sex will remember their previous partners during sex with their future spouses, and such memories will inevitably have negative effects. This particular thread of the movement's narrative offers another approach to the theme of temporality. Whereas self-control in the present will enrich one's projected future, premarital sex will impoverish it. Interestingly, the situation of remembering or "comparing" previous sexual partners is mostly presented as a future concern and not as a personal anecdote within the stories of "secondary virgins." Even as a hypothetical outcome, however, this narrative plays into widespread fears of not being desired (Herzog 2008), threatening our choices with largely unproven emotional and relational consequences.

Yet another way advocates make the case for abstinence is by citing putative scientific facts. This amateur biology, mostly centered on a discussion of hormones, gives the movement a claim to scientific authority and credibility. In *Unprotected* (2006), an anonymous campus psychiatrist spends pages speaking with contempt about health professionals who encourage "alternative sexualities" and advocate for universal "androgyny" (with reference to equal sexual footing for men and women). However, she asserts that "these are health, not moral, issues. I argue as a scientist, with biological facts, not biblical ones" (2006: xxi). Perhaps defensively anticipating

and preparing for liberal and feminist critiques of differential gendered sexual standards, movement discourse uses biological tropes to assert the existence of inherent differences between men's and women's sexual selves.

When I spoke with Andrea, she brought up the idea that “during sexual arousal, there are hormones that are released that bond [two people] together.” She went on to explain that

...in women there's a hormone called oxytocin that's released...it's kind of a bonding, happy hormone that will actually work to foster trust in a relationship. So if a woman starts having sex early on in a relationship, feelings of trust are coming up before she has an opportunity to discern whether he's really a good guy.

In men, she continued, “there's a hormone called vasopressin that's released that...fosters feelings of monogamy and wanting to protect...[but in] a relationship that's purely sexual...that can foster jealousy or possessiveness.”¹⁰ These arguments are complicated in a number of respects. For one, Andrea is the only person I have heard mention vasopressin, while oxytocin is widely referenced within abstinence discourse. This disproportionate focus on women's bodies implies that women are more tied to their bodies than men and are consequently unable to make the same intellectual choices. These pseudo-biological arguments reconfigure traditional ideas about essentialized sexual difference, modernizing them with contemporary scientific language. Yet the claim to scientific authority is undermined by the movement's tendency to anthropomorphize hormonal effects simplistically as “trust” and “jealousy.”

¹⁰ Andrea's explanation of vasopressin actually departs from the typical socio-biological argument that describes men as naturally promiscuous, more concerned with maximizing their reproductive success (by having sex with many women) than with protecting the women they do have sex with.

Furthermore, these arguments work only within the most fundamentalist interpretation of sexual abstinence. Many abstinence advocates write that the release of these hormones is not unique to intercourse, or even orgasm. Patricia, a contributor to the blog *Modestly Yours* (started by Wendy Shalit), posted about hearing Dr. Miriam Grossman speak at the “Sexuality, Integrity, and the University” conference at Princeton University in November 2008.¹¹ Patricia writes that

...the “politically incorrect” hormone oxytocin is the reason women can’t suppress the strong emotional attachment towards men they’ve had sex with. In fact, as Dr. Grossman warned with genuine concern, we should be careful hugging for more than 20 seconds. After that, our brains release trust-inducing hormones which affect our judgment (Sacawa 2008).

If even affectionate touch impairs our decision-making abilities, there are not many practical choices left. These hormone-based arguments are overly general, and they are not representative of widely accepted scientific belief. They characterize people as victims of their own bodies, making informed choices that their hormones nevertheless betray. And with a focus mostly on women’s bodies, they undermine their own rhetoric of choice and suggest that women cannot make the same choices as men. Such a limitation directly counters the movement’s other argument about people’s enlightened control over our more-than-animal bodies.

Through all these rhetorical strategies—choice, instrumentalism, pseudo-scientific explanation—the abstinence movement attempts to broaden its appeal beyond those who adhere to its religious and moral core. But besides the content of its discourse, the movement also manipulates style, striving to make itself “cool” and

¹¹ Grossman is the author of the book *Unprotected* (2006). She first published anonymously but is now a prominent figure in the abstinence movement.

appealing to young people's desires to both fit in and stand out by offering itself as a cohesive subculture with an alternative or even oppositional status.

Some of the rhetoric of the abstinence movement is designed to grab attention by arousing shock and surprise. When I asked Andrea about other students' response to her club—the New Sexual Revolution—she first spoke about the group's name. "I think when they first hear about our club, because of the name, they're not really sure what we're about," she said. "Sometimes there's a lot of confusion because [the name of our group] draws attention, so that's actually sort of a good thing." Andrea's club—and a "pro-life" and pro-abstinence blog of the same name—benefit both from the oppositional connotations of their name as well as the implication of being a cohesive, widespread movement.

The contemporary abstinence movement is a response to the sexual revolution(s) of the last several decades, but, in many ways, it follows the model of this revolution it so scorns. Casey, the founder of the Love and Fidelity Network, an organization that works to support college abstinence clubs, wrote in an opinion piece to the website of *the Glenn Beck Program*:¹²

...young people today are ill-formed and misinformed on the reasons defending the institution of marriage, the special role of the family, and sexual self-restraint. These students are calling for a new sexual revolution—one that empowers their *minds and hearts* to love responsibly and authentically (DeBenedetto 2008).

Casey's words echo the notion of revolution and speak to a larger strategy in abstinence and moral conservatism more broadly—declaring their position as a self-proclaimed oppositional movement in reaction to discontents with the status quo.

¹² Glenn Beck is a conservative television host. In August 2008, he aired a special program called "Life on Campus" which focused on being conservative in a liberal college environment. Casey was one of the panelists, as was Jonathan, a Princeton student I interviewed.

As I mentioned earlier, the abstinence movement has no centralized authority; it does not speak with one voice; aside from public abstinence-only education funding, its terms are not officially set. In short, there is a risk that abstinence will become a fragmented trend—a danger that abstinence advocates will succumb to the very pluralism they set out to combat. This risk goes against the belief of moral conservatives that the sacralization of sex is of societal importance and their goal of reversing the sexual revolution(s) of the last century. Abstinence outside the context of a “movement” potentially holds less weight and threatens to leave participants isolated, unsupported, and more likely to abandon the movement’s goals.

Abstinence pursued individually and collectively can look and feel very different. In her fieldwork with Unity Christians, Wilkins describes how most of the sexually abstinent young men she spoke with individually did not bring up temptation. In their communal conversations, however, there was extensive discussion of men’s all-consuming sexual desire, of their “minute-by-minute” struggle to remain pure in thought and in action. Wilkins uses “the virtual absence of temptation talk in Unity men’s individual stories” in contrast to the “collective performance of temptation” that underlay the men’s conversations about abstinence to discuss performed heterosexuality. She writes: “Instead of talking about scoring, Unity Christian men talk about how hard it is to manage temptation” (2008: 129). This alternative performance of heterosexuality offers participants a communal experience and a shared language to discuss abstinence. Contemporary abstinence discourse invites participants in with the promise of an individually beneficial choice. But at the same time, the movement presents itself as a youth-initiated revolution and

a collective effort. Abstinence offers participants a kind of subcultural identity—a way in which to interpret their social position as oppositional to a morally dissolute mainstream culture.

For potential participants who may be scared off by the prospect of an alternative subcultural ethos, the abstinence movement also ensures that its discourse absorbs elements of mainstream culture. Although they condemn mass media representation of sexuality, abstinence advocates take advantage of cultural trends, tropes, and references when crafting their messages. Participants at the Purity Ball posed for pictures as though it were the prom. The Silver Ring Thing was, on the surface, a multimedia rock concert. Leaders at both events encouraged participants to mark their involvement in the events and the movement via MySpace and Facebook, either by posting pictures to document the night or by signing up for official groups to receive support and updates. The Silver Ring Thing, in particular, was brimming with references to the very media it decried, showing clips from funny, raunchy teen movies to a highly receptive audience. The movement seems to take advantage of the idea that “sex sells,” but it uses sex to sell abstinence. And unlike some of the more conservative members of the movement—those who practice romantic, not just sexual, abstinence—some advocates emphasize that participants do not have to distance themselves from the dating scene.

At the heart of the matter, most advocates believe that abstinence is a self-evident, morally (and usually religiously) based code of conduct for all unmarried people. Faced with the practical difficulties of a relatively liberal sexual culture and extremely high rates of premarital sex, advocates make strategic choices and

compromises. Often, movement discourse emphasizes choice and individualism and instrumentalizes abstinence as smart protection from physical, emotional, and social consequences. The internal diversity of the abstinence movement, as well as the necessity of appropriating aspects of mainstream youth sexual culture in order to appeal to potential participants, sometimes causes advocates and participants to disagree about movement discourse. While some abstinence advocates and programs compromise and strategize to draw in more participants, others are unwilling, on principle, to alter the justification for abstinence.

Disagreements within the Movement

One of the biggest shifts in rhetoric—abstinence joining the “safer sex” conversation—is criticized by others within the movement. Indeed, it seems as though some student leaders of campus abstinence groups are critics of widespread abstinence rhetoric that focuses on health risks. Unlike some more official abstinence curricula and programming, the college students I spoke with do not underplay the effectiveness of condoms or contraception. They trust the general science behind safer sex technologies and are surrounded by plenty of unmarried, sexually active peers who do not appear to be suffering physical effects. Students I spoke with do not consider the threat of pregnancy or STIs to be sufficient to justify avoiding premarital sex. Rather, they are critical of movement advocates who justify abstinence in pragmatic, instrumental terms.

In speaking with the leaders of campus abstinence groups, I asked each student how she or he classifies abstinence: is it a moral issue? a health issue? a religious issue? While many of the students included health concerns in their responses, no student attributed such prominence to health and risk reduction as did the rhetoric stemming from more institutional sources such as the Silver Ring Thing. Bill, a leader of MIT's Anscombe Society, was particularly critical of health risks as a primary justification for abstinence. When we spoke by phone, he described his reasons for being involved in the abstinence movement as "mainly moral and religious." He continued: "I know sometimes people promoting abstinence focus on the health aspects of it, which are important, but in my mind they aren't the most important." Later, when I asked him if the abstinence movement had been changing recently, he said that it seemed to be "focusing more on the health aspect of it, like sexually transmitted diseases, which...I don't necessarily see as a positive direction."

Throughout our conversation, Bill spoke about sex outside marriage as devaluing one's partner. He was insistent on chastity as the only way of "treating sex as not an end in itself, but as a means of showing love for your partner and of procreation." When we discussed sex education, he was in favor of a program that would "mention aspects of contraception, but really the emphasis [would be] on being abstinent and being faithful." For Bill, abstinence is never simply about a reduction of health risks, and putting such a focus on these issues is missing the point. A health focus also paints abstinence as a response to negative dangers, whereas he considers abstinence to be a positive thing with benefits that should be at the forefront of these discussions.

Other students I spoke to were not so clearly against the abstinence movement's joining the health risk conversation. However, their combined critique of the single-mindedness of "safer sex" rhetoric and their discussions of their own primary motivations for abstinence lead me to conclude that they would be critical of framing abstinence as primarily a health risk reduction strategy.

For Andrea, safer sex discourse constructs a story around sex in which condoms and contraception can make sex much less risky than unprotected sex. This narrative is not wrong, per se; she is not interested in disputing these statistics with numbers of her own. Rather, this narrative is incomplete. For Andrea, "the safest sex still isn't the smartest," and the issue of abstinence cannot be tackled in instrumental terms. She is emphatic in her insistence that discourse around safer sex "doesn't tell us the whole story." Andrea's use of abstinence rhetoric is multilayered and nuanced. Unlike those who focus on pregnancy and STIs, she demands a break from the terms of discussion set by the safer sex crowd. Abstinence is important not only or primarily because it is the best assurance against pregnancy and infection, but rather because it fits into a "more beautiful understanding of what kind of expression sexuality is." For Andrea, only exclusive marital sex fully recognizes the true (sacred) nature of sexuality.

Movement leaders and participants who argue against the concession to health justifications are resisting a story that reduces abstinence to a means of avoiding negative consequences. Instead, they insist that abstaining from sex is in itself positive behavior. In maintaining that the act of abstention is not a means to an end, but an end in itself, advocates reframe the argument on their terms. Proponents and

opponents of abstinence ideology tend to become frustrated, as they seem to speak past one another, basing their reasons on fundamentally different assumptions about what is at stake. In response, there is a split within the abstinence movement between those who are willing to overshadow morality with arguments that engage the opposition's arguments, and those who are not.

Sometimes this dilemma plays out even in a single person's position. In *A Return to Modesty* (1999), Wendy Shalit spends nearly all her time on the practical concerns related to modesty and premarital sex. For example, some of her arguments reflect the neo-Victorian idea that women must test men's love by withholding sex: that avoiding sex before marriage will turn men's lust into love. And yet, after an entire book that focuses on topics such as why modesty is more sexually alluring than immodesty, she writes, on the second-to-last page, "I have defended modesty, essentially, in the most obscene way, but I did it because I had a hunch that this was the only way our culture would ever consider it" (243). Shalit's uncertainty about the effectiveness of presenting her real justifications for sexual modesty reflects the internal struggle of the movement.

Large-scale abstinence events and speakers aim to bring more people into the movement, and they may take any means possible to convince young people that sex outside marriage can only be harmful. Perhaps because students in abstinence clubs are involved in the abstinence movement on a much more local scale, they do not have to concede their core convictions. On these college campuses—whether at the Ivy League or "the number one Playboy party school" (ASU)—students within the

abstinence movement are conscious of holding minority opinions.¹³ Their clubs act strongly as support groups for those who have already chosen abstinence. And while they do work to create a public presence for ideas that differ from a sexually permissive norm, their supportive focus perhaps guides their insistence on maintaining the integrity of their ideology.

College students are not the movement's only internal critics. Others have voiced their opinions in response to the movement's rhetorical focus on the emotional risks of premarital sex. As with the discourse on health risks, abstinence advocates call upon the trope of emotional distress as a consequence of premarital sex, and some within the movement are noticing this shift and criticizing it as a distraction from and a distortion of the movement's moral message. In *Real Sex* (2005), Lauren Winner dedicates a chapter to dispelling "Lies the Church Tells about Sex." The first one she addresses is, "Premarital sex is guaranteed to make you feel lousy." She writes about the insistence from some proponents of abstinence that "if we have premarital sex, we'll feel bad about it" (85-6). She continues: "But sometimes it is not true...even after sinful sex, a person will feel fantastic" (86). Winner posits a hypothetical woman, Lillian, who is in her mid-twenties and "has heard since puberty that premarital sex will leave her feeling guilt-ridden and lonely" (89). She has sex with her boyfriend of eight months and does not feel bad about it. Winner explains the risk in this situation: "If guilt is the only resource the church has given Lillian to diagnose sin and remain chaste, in the absence of guilt, she will simply keep having sex, not to mention she'll begin to doubt the authority of her pastor" (90). Advocates of abstinence, according to Winner, need to present an objective position—that

¹³ Andrea described ASU in these terms.

premarital sex is always morally wrong—instead of relying on individuals' subjective feelings.

Abstinence rhetoric is far from monolithic, but it tends to reflect and reinforce a religiously based sexual morality and construction of the desiring self. Because abstinence advocates find themselves in a seeming ideological minority, they sometimes make strategic shifts and compromises in rhetoric. A moral message is supplemented—and sometimes overshadowed—by instrumental and pseudo-scientific arguments and an emotional appeal to a promised means of belonging and being desired. This range of messages and tensions within the movement highlight the complexity of a sexual movement still finding its grounding in contemporary culture.

Chapter Three

Audience and Appeal at Two Pledge Events

Sexual abstinence is not the proposed solution for a single problem—rather, it is a blanket solution presented to a variety of communities with different problems. In this chapter I work through my observations of the Purity Ball and the Silver Ring Thing, two case studies that contextualize some of the key strategies and compromises used in the movement. My primary purpose is to analyze the ways in which potential participants are constructed and how the message of abstinence gets inflected differently to accommodate various communities. I consider how the movement’s constructed problems and solution—abstinence—appeal to young people as a strategy for negotiating their social and sexual selves.

The Purity Ball

If abstinence-only education is the most pervasive of movement activities, Purity Balls are the most symbolically charged. These events situate an abstinence pledge within a highly structured performative event. Girls as young as eight and young women through their twenties attend, their fathers acting as their escorts, and the girls and/or their fathers pledge to guard the girls’ sexual purity. The first Purity Ball was sponsored in 1998 by Colorado pastor Randy Wilson and his wife Lisa, and similar events have since taken place in forty-eight states. These events tend to be formal, even black tie, and can cost up to a hundred dollars for the night. The media

image of Purity Balls is primarily white and middle- or upper-middle class and is associated with middle-America Christian evangelicalism.

Contrary to this media stereotype, the Purity Ball I attended in October 2008 in Queens, New York, was sponsored by a conference of black churches and catered to middle-class African Americans. In addition to fathers and daughters, the invitation for the event was extended to mothers and sons, and many teenagers were accompanied by mentors rather than parents. The event, complete with speakers, performers, and dinner, was paid for by the church conference and was entirely free to those who attended.

After two subways and a bus ride, I arrived at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon at a church in Queens for the church conference's first Purity Ball, entitled "Worth the Wait 2008." A few girls posed outside the church for prom-like photographs. They were dressed formally in evening gowns of all colors, not the white, wedding-like gowns associated with some of the more publicized balls. Just inside the door, people gathered and greeted one another. I began to speak with a woman named Betty*; she was accompanying her son and four other boys whom she mentors through a youth program.¹⁴ When I asked how people responded when she recruited attendees for this event, she said that many of the kids were not interested at all, and some of the parents did not see the need for it. She remarked that the event was ill-timed, given that many of the fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds in her program already have boyfriends and girlfriends, which she seemed to equate with their being sexually active. Betty also likened the Purity Ball to debutante balls, which this conference of churches had sponsored in previous years.

¹⁴ Names with asterisks have been changed.

This analogy to the debutante ball places the Purity Ball within a gendered and classed cultural history. It strongly feminizes what in practice was a mixed-gender event at which both boys and girls were invited to dress up, attend with an opposite-gendered parent or adult, and pledge sexual purity. Though the boys seem to have been invited as equal participants, the debutante ball analogy suggests that their presence is designed to complement and support a social process aimed primarily at girls. The comparison also implies a connection to an upper-class custom.

Traditionally, debutante balls were formal events at which young women were presented to elite society; they “came out” as adults and as potential marriage prospects. These events were popularized as high school proms, which were originally conceived of as a means of democratizing the benefits of upper-class rituals by extending them across class lines in a genteel, putatively “civilizing” performance (Best 2000: 6). Like debutante balls and proms, the Purity Ball involves its participants in a performative and ideally transformative event. Participants perform specific gendered roles and are exhorted to undergo a personal moral transformation.

After signing in at the welcome desk and taking a variety of pledge cards—there were different ones for mentors, fathers, mothers, daughters, and sons—I sat down at my assigned table. A ballroom with a huge chandelier had been set with twenty tables of eight: black tablecloths decorated with white candles and red rose petals dotting the center. A large, white cake sat on the buffet table with the words “I’m worth the wait” written in icing. A band played at the front of the room, though not on a raised stage, and the music was loud enough to inhibit very easy conversation. This setup constructed the attendees as honored, refined guests. Some

people walked around greeting friends and taking pictures, while others took their seats. Despite the designation of the event as a “ball,” we stayed seated nearly the entire night; though there was music, there was no dancing.

At my table were two father-daughter pairs and a mentor who did not seem to be linked to any particular teenager. I struck up a conversation with the mentor, Gloria*, who also described the Purity Ball as a replacement for the debutante ball. She praised the Purity Ball as initiating the mentoring process rather than serving as a bounded, one-night event. Though there was to my knowledge no official continuation of this Purity Ball, to Gloria it seems to open up the possibility of a long-term mentoring process on matters of purity and relationships, such as the eight-month-long program she runs at her church in Harlem.

After getting hors d’oeuvres from the buffet table, I spoke with one of the fathers at my table, who had been asked to videotape the event and who had brought his fourteen-year-old daughter along. As they got up to get food and came back to the table, they acted out a practice of gendered gentility: the girl waiting for her father to help her rise and be seated. At the table, however, more contemporary practice prevailed; rather than talking with each other, she and her friend spent much of this beginning time texting other friends and answering short questions from Gloria.

We had been given programs titled “Worth the Wait 2008,” containing a schedule of events and short biographies of the organizers and performers. An hour and a half after the official start time of four o’clock, Pastor Williams* began the official program, standing in front of the band. “We are here to celebrate God’s plan for purity and marriage,” he told us, and then asked everyone to “stand and show your

beauty tonight.” As he called out the names of more than fifteen churches, the members of each one stood to music, spotlight, and applause.¹⁵

After these introductions and welcomes, the pastor explained that this event was to celebrate abstinence before marriage and purity afterward. Some people criticize the Purity Ball, he continued, because they say young people make these pledges, break them, and end up “falling harder.” “But I play to win,” he said, “and if we’re on God’s side we play to win.” God will reduce the chances of falling, he said: “Ours is a God of second, third, fourth...infinity chances.”

Pastor Williams led a prayer to thank God for the food and the event. He explained that “we are pledging purity”—not only premarital abstinence—and that this encompasses things like lifestyle, dress, and language. He told us that we are not suffering just from STDs in the literal sense of sexually transmitted diseases, but from “socially transmitted diseases from spending time with people we ought not to and doing things we ought not to be doing.” This metaphor of contagion from mainstream society was reiterated throughout the night, mostly in statements about the harmful influence of the media.

After performances by a poet and a singer-songwriter, Pastor Williams addressed us again. “How often have we spoken to our young people about what *not* to do? I’m still waiting on what *to* do,” he said. The Purity Ball—which will be an annual event—is a “celebration, but also much more,” and, according to Pastor Williams, it offers a medium to talk to young people. Interestingly, however, he directed these comments not to young people, but to parents and mentors. As much as

¹⁵ Church membership was a strong marker of identity; a man at my table originally tried to place me by what church I attend and was surprised when I told him that I am Jewish.

this event was about convincing teenagers to pledge purity, it was also about convincing parents of their children's vulnerability to a dangerous environment and enlisting them to continue these conversations with their children. "We need to have a one-on-one with our young people," said Pastor Williams, adding that "hip-hop is having lots of one-on-ones." He continued: "The media is raising our kids. We need to talk to them about healthy relationships, HIV, especially when they go to college. We need to talk about purity, relationships, and being single."

Later on, the emcee—a youth pastor—spoke to the participants: "You are what you eat, and what you take in," he said. He began to sing a commercial song, prompting the whole room to enthusiastically sing a marketing jingle, complete with the company's phone number. Everyone laughed, and he told us that videos subliminally brainwash us all the time. "They are trying to create us to be something that we're not," he said, again attributing a monolithic and negative effect to the media. Unlike Pastor Williams, he addressed an undefined "us," more closely aligned with the teenagers than with their parents.

Elder Jack* came to the front of the room to make a "Toast to Purity." He asked his daughter to stand. "She's my little queen," he told us, "and I can't but pray that she will stay pure until the time comes. God will tell you when the time is right." He warned us about listening to "those Jay-Z's" (a comment met with roaring laughter) and urged us to "get something. Get a degree. Tell him you're looking for a man worth something." He went on to say that he often asks his daughter to "please marry a gentleman like me."

After this toast, Pastor Williams spoke about how important it is for fathers to model for their daughters how men should act toward them. He talked about a friend who started taking his daughter out when she was ten. He showed her what a date should be, so that she would know to walk away from men who do not treat her properly. Pastor Williams then asked for a young woman to volunteer to “give a toast to your fellow young ladies.” A girl named Nicole* volunteered, her friends cheering her on. “Purity rocks!” one exclaimed. Nicole told us that one in four black teenage girls gets an STD: “Those are the facts and they’re scary.” She continued: “You’ve got a prize between your thighs and nobody can buy that.” The emcee then took the microphone and told us: “We need more fathers taking an interest in calling their daughters queens and princesses, because that’s what they are.”

These speeches ignored the young male attendees at the Purity Ball. Consistent with this erasure by the event’s main speakers, the musical performers also presented a message of gendered asymmetry that cast purity as a female responsibility. While a male performer sang a song with the lyrics, “Wonderful woman, you save it all for me,” a female singer sang, “I don’t mind waiting for you.”

Later in the evening, Elder Jack asked for volunteers: “Ten young ladies who are...dating?...looking?...admiring?” This request was met with laughter, but ten girls—including one from my table—walked to the front. Elder Jack held a bag with slips of paper describing ten consequences that can come from dating and sex—five bad and five good. He asked each girl to pick one, read it aloud, and explain her reaction. The ten things were “a person that can’t be trusted left you not trusting other dates”; “heartbreak (broke up with you when you weren’t ready)”; “a love that

respects your values”; “received an STD”; “shares your interests and hobbies”; “has a great conversation and makes you feel good about yourself”; “pure happiness”; “self-centered person”; “a beautiful person who gives you compliments”; and “low self-esteem.” Significantly, girls alone were called upon to publicly represent the consequences of premarital sex. Moreover, as the majority of the consequences enumerated were tied to emotions, the activity reinforces notions of emotional female sexuality, presumably in contrast to a more detached, autonomous male sexuality.

Despite the general disparagement of the media, the emcee encouraged all the participants to go home and post their pictures from the event on MySpace and Facebook to show their friends how much fun it had been. He then introduced the keynote speaker, Pastor Roberts* from a congregation in Atlanta.

After positively referencing Nicole’s comment about the “prize between your thighs,” Pastor Roberts led everyone in prayer. He warned of “the danger of dysfunctional relationships” and made us repeat the phrase. “Many people haven’t seen a healthy relationship,” he said, “and we mirror what we see. The media loves showing people who have a child first and marry later. Or who live together first and marry later. If you live with dysfunction long enough, you begin to think it’s normal.” He then began to tell the biblical story of Samson and Delilah as an illustration of the endless pursuit to find someone else’s weakness. He questioned why we love who we do and mocked the idea of a strong woman or man falling in love with a weak man or woman, respectively. Delilah comes from a valley, “a low place,” which he described as a measure of her value. Samson and Delilah’s relationship is devoid of reciprocity: he falls in love with her; she doesn’t fall in love with him. Pastor Roberts spoke to the

participants: “You’re always the one calling, supporting” the other person; “you’ve got to make up in your mind that you’re going to stop falling in love with people who don’t even like you.” He also spoke about the dishonest beginning of Samson and Delilah’s relationship. He continued: “If you don’t have a job, tell me. If you’re still dating somebody else, tell me. If you want to be with me, tell me.”

The pastor urged us to refrain from and recognize seduction with a purpose. Samson was used to trading compassion for cash, he said, because he had slept with harlots before Delilah. Dysfunction becomes normal, he emphasized. He then told a story of a man bringing his female friend a newspaper ad offering a million dollars in exchange for a one-night stand that will be anonymous and disease-free. The man asks if she would accept such an offer. She says yes (as do the girls at my table—“not even a question”). Then he asks if she will do the same with him for twenty-five dollars. “What do you think I am,” she says, “a prostitute?” “We’ve already established that,” he says, “we’re just negotiating the price.”

Pastor Roberts made all the students repeat the phrase, “I’m not for sale.” He said: “You can’t tie him down with a baby, you can’t turn him around. You’ve got to tell yourself, ‘I’m through playing myself.’ You can rejoice and ask God for a second chance. We’ve all been like Samson.” While he used a biblical allegory, Pastor Roberts’s speech also relied heavily on psycho-therapeutic advice about self-esteem. Indeed, much of it is good advice. But what is striking is the equation of the teenage attendees’ relationships with the story of Samson and Delilah. Within this analogy there is no acknowledgment of the possibility of healthy romantic and sexual relationships among teenagers.

Pastor Roberts continued: “At some point, your strength is gone. God will send a storm in your life so you know something is off.” He then began a long parable of sorts about sitting on a plane, being very excited about the destination, and waiting for it to take off. It just will not take off, and finally the pilot announces that you must get off the plane because it is broken, and you must wait in the airport. Something better is coming, he said, and it will take you where you need to go, but you have to wait for it. He emphasized that you need to trust that God will send a better plane—a better relationship—when the time is right.

An important part of that right relationship, Pastor Roberts went on, is shared religious beliefs. “I’m convinced that Christians ought to date and marry Christians.... If a dog can get with a dog, and a cat can get with a cat, and a fish can get with a fish, why can’t Christians marry Christians?” While I was busy being very confused (dogs, cats, fish...*humans?*), the room erupted in cheering and applause.

“How can two walk together unless they agree?” the pastor asked. “How is somebody going to love you if they don’t even love Jesus?” He encouraged young people to reply to the question, “Are you dating anyone?” with, “Yes, I’m dating 1-1-1.” If asked, “What’s your phone number?” to say, “1-1-1.” When asked what that means, they are to reply, “I’m dating one Father, one Son, and one Holy Spirit.” He told us, “If you have to go to the movies by yourself, then you and Jesus go. If you have to go to the mall by yourself, then you and Jesus go.” He said, “Tell yourself: this is my body, I’ve been bought with a prize, and I glorify God.” He emphasized that it is better to be unmarried and happy than unhappy and married. The pastor’s

speech was very well delivered, and a fourteen-year-old participant told me later that it was her favorite part of the night.

Speakers at the Purity Ball urged participants to avoid “dysfunctional relationships.” Any discussion of healthy relationships in the present was missing; they were located exclusively in the future, on God’s timing, and leading to faithful marriages. The result was an implicit disapproval of teenage relationships. This equation of sexual abstinence and romantic abstinence seems to stem from several assumptions: that all serious relationships between teenagers are unhealthy, that all relationships involve sex, and that all sex happens in relationships.

Girls were told to direct their energy toward God rather than toward romance, although the devotional relationship was sometimes expressed in erotic idioms. A woman earlier in the evening shared her favorite quotation: “A woman’s heart should be so lost in God that a man has to seek Him to find it.” However, the importance of avoiding human romance was not always presented so poetically. Leaders’ discourse at the ball tended to construct the attendees as naïve, innocent, and immature. The speakers spent considerable time seeking to impress upon the attendees their own vulnerability to temptation. Participants were constructed as able to understand consequence but unable to negotiate their own relationships to avoid it, and they were thus urged to avoid romantic relationships until an ambiguous future that would take place on God’s timing. This advice was often given in sympathetic and empowering language.

The leaders of the Purity Ball attributed to the participants a kind of innocence that has historically been denied to them in the dominant culture. As we have seen, traditional white discourses constructed young girls of color as biologically excessive in their sexuality. Such girls were imagined to be a potential contaminant for inherently “pure” white middle-class girls. In the discourse circulating at the Purity Ball, however—an event organized by and for black congregants—girls of color were extended the same inherent purity and capacity to control their sexuality. This claim to purity was articulated in the language of religion—a powerful force in many black communities, historically associated with respectability, moral uplift, and the regulatory influence of the community on individual conduct. Speakers cited the same Christian texts and Protestant ideology as many of their white counterparts, and the Purity Ball offered its attendees a redefinition of their true nature as pure and innocent. They were “at risk” not from their own naturalized promiscuity, but from the hypersexual outside culture, embodied in “the media.” Implicitly rejecting white racist discourses of black sexuality, the Purity Ball affirmed in its participants a fundamental innocence and a vulnerability to risk.

Throughout the ball, participants were called upon to perform their gender and sexuality in ways that articulate a particular claim to respectability. The classed performativity of the ball itself—harking back to debutante balls—is expected to extend afterward. The organizers of the ball seek to prove to the participants that they can effectively perform as refined gendered individuals in control of their sexuality. The leaders of the ball construct their young participants to be *more respectable than* others. By defining shared faith as crucial to healthy development, the speakers use

religion to distinguish themselves and their audience from other communities not historically considered pure and respectable, implicitly including segments of the African American community that fall short of this ideal, those, for instance, more receptive to hip hop than to church discourse. In asking their participants to postpone dating, to exercise self-control in matters of sexuality, and to select romantic partners from within the religious community, the leaders of the Purity Ball encourage adherence to traditional middle-class values of discipline and restraint. They draw on and contribute to a discourse of moral uplift according to which individuals have the potential to improve themselves and raise their community by taking personal responsibility for their actions.

Much of the efficacy of the Purity Ball relies on modes of address: speakers constructed participants as naturally pure and moral, as naïve about risk and consequence, and as receptive to moral instruction and able to improve themselves by regulating their conduct. But the event itself, particularly the culminating pledges, also functioned as a performative and ideally transformative act. As much as abstinence advocates emphasize that these pledges are not a onetime thing—that participants will have to face temptation and make decisions throughout their lives—there is clearly something significant to the onetime, public, communal pledge. The pledge came at the end of several hours of programming that constructed participants as both inherently pure and frighteningly vulnerable. All this information and framing was presented with a singular solution—the purity pledge—as imminent.

At the Purity Ball, the pledges comprised the last portion of the evening—just before we ate the “I am worth the wait” cake. Mentors, fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters each stood, in turn, and recited their pledges. The sons read:

I, _____, choose before God to remain pure in my lifestyle, as I grow toward the goal of manhood, and until such a time that I marry. I will be a young man of integrity and accountability as I strive to be an example to those around me. I will be bold and courageous, no matter what. Today, I choose to seek after the high calling of God in every area of my life.

The daughters followed, reciting:

I, _____, choose before God to remain pure in my lifestyle as God ordained it to be. I will be a young lady of integrity and accountability as I strive to be an example to those around me. I will be bold and courageous, no matter what. Today, I choose to seek after the high calling of God in every area of my life.

After all the pledges, Pastor Williams announced: “You have sealed your commitment.”

Interestingly, these pledges begin first with the rhetoric of choice, rather than with “I pledge” or “I promise.” At the event, however, the leaders did not invite anyone who wished to stand and recite, but invited everyone who fit into each defined category (such as son or daughter). It is thus questionable how much of a choice this pledge really was. Additionally, the girls “chose” to remain pure “as God ordained it to be,” and they pledged purity indefinitely. In contrast, the boys voluntarily chose to remain pure—perhaps for the sake of female purity—and only until marriage. The boys’ choice, as it was not religiously ordained, was arguably more “free,” while the girls chose what was morally expected of them. Male purity is positioned as less essential and less natural than female purity.

Though it was supposedly the reason for the Purity Ball, the pledge was neither the most well orchestrated nor the most well received portion of the event. There was no programming afterward, and the female singer's reprise of "I don't mind waiting" did not get everyone singing. People began immediately to talk and move. The cake was cut, and people grabbed dessert and trickled out the doors. On my way out, I ran into Betty again, who asked me if I had had a good time. We talked about the event, and she seemed dubious of its effectiveness, telling me again that many of the young people who pledged at the event are already dating and, presumably, sexually involved with their partners. She described her own past, of beginning to date her husband when she was much older, and of his being her only serious romantic and sexual partner. She shook her head, describing the students she works with reporting, "Yeah, we're having sex, but we use condoms. We know all about that stuff." She seems to represent the Purity Ball as a laudable but dated event. She supports its goals but is dubious that the event will change the minds of her students who have been so affected by mainstream sexual culture.

The Purity Ball was a multifaceted event, both a departure from and a return to historical concerns of the community it served. Its discourse was categorically religious in both style and content, and it constructed purity as both moral adherence and classed performance. The event's appeal is especially salient when considered in the context of other large-scale abstinence events, such as the Silver Ring Thing.

Silver Ring Thing

Abstinence pledge-based events are not all formal affairs. Since 1996, the Silver Ring Thing has been sponsoring events and encouraging teenagers to wear silver rings as a sign of their pledges to save sex for marriage. The Silver Ring Thing is explicitly associated with Christian evangelicalism. Begun by Denny and Amy Pattyn, the Silver Ring Thing has as its mission “to motivate, educate, support, and transform generations of young people to embrace a lifestyle of Christ-centered sexual abstinence until marriage” and envisions “creat[ing] a culture shift in America where abstinence becomes the norm again rather than the exception.” The hosts and the production team of the Silver Ring Thing travel across the country, holding several events each week for middle and high school students.

Just a week after the Purity Ball, I attended a Silver Ring Thing live event—part of the “Mythbusters” tour—at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. I drove to the event, parking near a large truck with the words “Silver Ring Thing: What are you waiting for?” emblazoned on its side. Half an hour before the six o’clock start time, the area outside was already swarming with middle and high school students and their parents. At one of several tables staffed by volunteers, a spunky tween sized me for a ring and asked if I preferred the thick or thin version. After writing my size and style of choice on a sticker, she told me to bring it to the registration table, where two women greeted me warmly. I purchased a five dollar ticket and received a green wristband, indicating that I chose not to prepay for a

twenty dollar silver ring. But my size sticker was affixed to my wristband regardless, just in case I should change my mind.

A table inside the door was full of merchandise: T-shirts, stickers, buttons. A shirt read: “How to have the best sex ever,” an attention-grabbing sentiment that gave no clues as to its answer (wait until marriage). One button said: “Safe sex?” written above a skull and crossbones. Underneath it read: “Warning: No condom can protect 100% against pregnancy, AIDS, or any STD.” A young woman—nineteen-year-old Lauren*—standing near the merchandise greeted me eagerly. As we talked, I learned that she is part of the national team: eleven young adults who travel around the country for nine months, helping with the events.

Outside, I was overwhelmed by how crowded it was getting, with people rushing around to get sized for rings and to register. Kids stood in clusters; many had come with friends or youth groups. There were a considerable number of parents, but far fewer than students. Everyone was dressed casually in jeans, sneakers, cotton T-shirts, and zip-up sweatshirts. I walked over to a group of four girls and asked what their blue wristbands meant, pointing out that mine was green. “We bought rings,” they told me. I asked if they go to school locally—yes—and how they found out about this event. One girl answered, “My dad told me about it.” She did not look particularly happy about this, and I asked if her dad had made her come, which she answered in the affirmative. “Do you know how long it is?” another asked me. When I replied that I thought it would last about two hours (this turned out to be an underestimate), she and her friends groaned, and one of them said, “I told you!”

These girls seemed to view the event as something organized by adults and targeted at youth, a perspective that was disputed later by the event's speakers.

By this time, it was six o'clock. As a parent's session was beginning in another room, I walked with the students into a large auditorium, where a band was playing. We stood, but did not dance. Four teenagers—who identified themselves as siblings—played instruments onstage: two keyboards, a bright blue electric violin, and a guitar. Two middle-aged men played bass and drums in the background. The band began its songs with shout-outs to Jesus, and one of the keyboardists introduced a song by saying: "I won't conform anymore to this world. We're in this world, but we're not of this world. We do not have to conform to the standards that it sets for us. That's what this entire event is about." In comparison with the discourse at the Purity Ball, her tone was more self-assertive; rather than needing to achieve self-esteem, she seemed to already have—and flaunt—a strong sense of self.

The room was dark, the music loud. Students seemed excited and went along with requests for participation; a few donned green glow-in-the-dark necklaces. Whereas at the Purity Ball the attendees were positioned as honored guests, at the Silver Ring Thing, the attendees were treated like audience members at a rock concert, and the event seemed immediately like entertainment.

The band left, and two emcees in their mid-twenties came onstage, throwing free CDs and T-shirts into the crowd. People screamed, jumped, and dove for the free items. The male emcee led the crowd in various yelling contests: "ladies" versus "fellas" and middle school students versus high school students. Finally, he had the right and left sides shout "ay-oh" and "aight" at each other. He asked if there were

“any Latinos in the house?” and several people cheered. He continued, each time met with acknowledgment from the crowd: “Any Caucasians? Where my white people at? How about African Americans? Any mixed people? Where my mixed people at?” There were notable holes in his categories, and it surprised me to hear him address race so explicitly. Both he and the female emcee were Latino/a, and while the audience was not racially homogeneous, it was largely made up of white students.

The male emcee told everyone to join the Street Team, as well as to add the Silver Ring Thing on MySpace and Facebook. He encouraged everyone to come forward and dance, and many students joined in doing the “Cha Cha Slide” and “Cotton Eyed Joe.” The emcee then sent them back to their seats but urged everyone to move forward. “The back is for old people,” he said, implicitly characterizing the event as for and by young people, despite its institutional backing. When things quieted down, the female emcee told us that an elderly couple named the Nelsons had followed them to the event and asked to perform. She asked us to try and act like we were enjoying their performance and assured us that the “real show” would start soon.

A man and woman came onstage—young adults dressed up to look old and goofy. They put up a sign that said: “Mr. and Mrs. Nelson present: Sex Stops Here.” They asked us, “Who likes sing-alongs?” and they ran through a series of parodies of widely known songs: “Let’s talk about sex,” “Barbie Girl,” “Can’t Touch This.” “There’s more than STDs to worry about. You could be accused of having a love child that’s not yours!” they said and then launched into “Billie Jean.” They sang “I like Big Butts” and “Shaking that Thang” before telling us, “Just say no, kids. The sex stops here.” This parody positioned the “real programming” as young and in

touch, in contrast to the cringe-inducing example of traditional “don’t do it” sex education driven by “old people.”

A new emcee came onstage, throwing more free T-shirts into the crowd. Screens on either side of the stage showed a short video in which all the silver rings threatened to be lost on their way to this event. A character in the video announced: “Silver Ring Thing starts NOW!” and streamers burst down from the ceiling to music, yelling, and applause. This beginning, of course, was preceded by a significant amount of introductory programming, all of which seemed to build anticipation for what was to come.

A skit began: three boys came onto the stage, talking about how excited they were to score tonight—on Guitar Hero.¹⁶ Two girls came over, and when they asked what the plans were for the night, one of the boys replied, “I thought we’d dim the lights, have some energy drinks, play some Guitar Hero.” But one of the boys was hesitant; he was not so eager to play tonight. Finally, he said, “I just think that maybe I should wait until I’m married to start playing Guitar Hero.” His friends teased him: “By the time you start playing, you’re gonna be on beginner. I’m already on expert.” They told him, “You’ve got to play, everyone plays.” He hesitated and then mentioned that Guitar Hero is everywhere he looks: “I turn on MTV expecting to see music, but no, it’s all about Guitar Hero.” He asked why his friends were so concerned with scoring, and they launched into euphemisms: “I like multiplayer mode,” “Show me that whammy bar!” He held the play guitar and explained, “I like to put my arms around the neck, like to hold the body close. Guitar Hero is an act of intimacy. You have no respect for the game.” He put the play guitar down and walked

¹⁶ Guitar Hero is a video game.

out. At this, one of the girls declared, “Now that he doesn’t want to play I like him even more,” and she and her friend decided that they were not up for a game of premarital Guitar Hero either.

Immediately, there began a series of parody commercials: a DVD called *There for the Break-Up* intended for singles who might otherwise “miss out on” breakup fights; an ad featuring a couple who met on STDharmony.com, whose relationship was portrayed as grossly and purely sexual. Most significant was a mock-commercial styled after the ad for Apple Computers, in which two male characters stand against a white backdrop and announce, “I’m a Mac” and “I’m a PC.” The Mac character is young, attractive, “cool” and casually dressed, while the PC is represented by an older, less attractive, nerdy man wearing a business suit. In the Silver Ring Thing’s version, the younger, more attractive man told us, “I’m Waiting,” and an older, less attractive man told us, “I’m Not Waiting.” In short segments throughout the night, they encountered different problems. Not Waiting spun a jeopardy-style wheel of STIs—the whole while cheering for himself to land on the sole segment that read “clean.” When he tried to commiserate, Waiting told him, “My girlfriend and I are waiting, so I don’t have to worry about that.” Later, Not Waiting was swarmed by a half-dozen infants and complaining children, evidence of the potentially unpleasant, unintended side effect of his sexual activity. Again, Waiting told him, “I don’t have to worry about that.” The Waiting character was “cooler,” more attractive, also in a romantic relationship, and seemingly happier in comparison with the Not Waiting character.¹⁷

¹⁷ This surface comparison is effective, but abstinence also seems to mirror the philosophy behind Apple computers as compared with personal computers. Ordering an Apple computer involves far

In another segment, words scrolled up the screen and were read aloud by a man's voice: "Laws of the Father: Law number five, Clause three. You may have heard that sex without a barrier method can kill you. When it comes to my daughter, I'm the barrier, and I will kill you. This has been Laws of the Father." Whereas the Waiting vs. Not Waiting ad had a young man speaking for himself about abstaining from sex, Laws of the Father positions a young women's abstinence as a result of patriarchal protection, not as her decision.

The screens then flashed to the words: "Mythbusters: Sex has no consequences." The video stopped, and the male emcee came to the stage. "This isn't one of those health classes," he said, and the screens showed a clip from *Mean Girls* where the gym teacher tells the students, "At your age, you're going to have a lot of urges. You're going to want to take off your clothes and touch each other. But if you do touch each other, you *will* get chlamydia—and die."

The emcee told us, "We're not here to talk about how bad sex is; we're here to talk about how good it can be." He made us yell after him, "SEX IS GREAT!" We did this several times, and each time, he finished the sentence: "sex *is* great, that's why we have hormones," then, "sex *is* great, that's why we have the equipment," and "sex *is* great, in the context of marriage." This last statement seemed to catch the audience off guard, but he continued: "That means, your parents, you know, probably on your couch at some point—I don't know if that changes how you watch TV...." A few students groaned, and the emcee appeared to have successfully (if temporarily)

fewer options than ordering a PC. Apple comes from the idea that their computer configuration is so ideal that it will work for everyone. A PC, on the other hand, accommodates individual and varying needs and configures a computer that is right for each person. In turn, however, the PC is also well known for contracting debilitating viruses.

dissociated sex from funny teen movies. “You’re designed to have sex with one person: your husband or wife,” he told us.

Then he instructed us to imagine the best Christmas present we’ve ever received. He guided us through a story of peeking at the present under the tree a week before Christmas, peeking every day until finally, we open it. “Now you’re Easy Baking and you’re Tickling Elmo, and you’re so happy,” he said, “and then you re-wrap it.” On Christmas Day, you open your presents, but you are no longer so excited by what you got. “You’ll always wish you had waited,” he said.

He moved the story away from metaphor and told us that if we wait until marriage to have sex, we will know that “nobody has a piece of your heart, nobody has a piece of your life.” There will be “no comparing” our spouse to previous partners, and we will be able to give “the best gift ever—a onetime gift.” He anticipated our misgivings: “Now you’re saying, I don’t want to be the only one, but this is a *worldwide* movement.” He also noted that “later, someone will be talking about dating and waiting.” By emphasizing abstinence as both a widespread movement and an option that does not have to distance a person from the dating scene, he constructed it as both popular and feasible.

“Some people have never had a boyfriend or girlfriend,” he said, “and they think they’re going to wait to make decisions about sex until they’re in that situation.” This is a horrible idea, he said: “These aren’t decisions you make in the dark, in your underwear, on your parents’ couch.” He addressed the boys specifically, saying, “Ladies find it very appealing that a guy is waiting.” This statement, along with others, constructed boys’ abstinence as a free and laudable choice, done for the

greater goal of facilitating girls' abstinence. In contrast, girls' abstinence was treated as a natural fulfillment of their true desires and as a vital means of protection.

A new emcee, Greg*, came onstage and asked for a "ladies' man" to come up to the stage. Blond, seventeen-year-old Dave* answered this call. Greg gave him a piece of wood with half a heart painted on it, telling him, "This represents your life." He held up another piece of wood with the other half of the heart on it and said, "This represents your future wife." Dave was sent backstage for some "going out clothes" while Greg told him he was going to "get you three dates." He looked for "three beautiful young ladies" from the audience, and brought up Anna*, Julie*, and Katie*. Dave came back out wearing a goofy apron and goggles on his head. Greg told him, "You dated all three of these girls," and sent him walking down the center of the stage with Anna. They were willing volunteers, and they play-acted their date, dancing slowly. Greg told Dave, "You had a really great time, and you want to take things to the next level," and then fed him a pickup line: "Hey, baby, when God made you, he was showing off," which Dave repeated. Greg said, "That line worked, and you crossed some lines, went a little too far. But things got weird, and you broke up." He directed Anna to the side of the stage.

This pattern was repeated with the next two girls. Each time, Greg fed Dave a new pickup line: "Do you like Campbell's soup? 'Cause you're mmm mmm good," and "Hey, baby, smile if you want me." Greg then told Dave: "You dated all three of these girls, and you crossed the line with all three of them, so when you broke up, they took a piece of your life with them." Suddenly, the lights dimmed, scary music played, and a man came onstage wielding a chainsaw and dramatically cut three

triangles out of the wooden heart, leaving it with jagged edges. The lights came back on, the music stopped, and Greg called Dave and Anna forward. He told Dave, “You can never forget her face. You’ll have to compare her to your wife someday.” He then handed one of the cut-out pieces to Anna, telling her, “You’re going to have to take that piece with you forever,” and sent her back to her seat. This scenario played out twice more with Julie and Katie, the last time Greg dramatically scooping up sawdust off the floor with his hands to give to Katie, along with the heart cut-out.

Greg asked Dave, “You want to get married someday, right?” “Yeah,” he replied. “Well, that day is today!” Greg said. A girl appeared from backstage, and Greg had the two hold up both sides of the wooden heart to touch. One was whole, the other jagged and missing pieces. Greg said, “Some of you might be saying: that’s me, I crossed some lines. Tonight can be your night, don’t worry. You might be saying, Greg, you’re crazy to think I’ll wait until marriage to have sex”—here he held up both sides of the heart, one jagged, together—“well, I think you’re crazy not to.”

This story relies on a construction of the self as a finite entity that can only be depleted by impermanent relationships and premarital sex. It does not allow for the possibility that the self might “grow” from interactions—even painful ones. Instead, it presents a potentially compelling story that reinterprets the temporary pain and heartache of a breakup as irreconcilable loss. More confusing, however, is the brief nod to those who were there for “second chances.” This story relies on both permanent, irreversible damage to the self and the perpetual possibility of “starting over.” It seems doubtful that this activity alone could persuade participants to see

themselves as both “damaged goods” and potentially redeemable, though later testimonies gave more weight to the possibility of starting over.

After more parody commercials, the screen illuminated with the second challenge for the “Mythbusters”: “You can date and wait.” Unlike the first myth of the evening—“Sex has no consequences”—this one was about to be proved true. Lauren came onto the stage and spoke about what she has learned—from experience—about how to “date and wait.” She had an acronym for us: BACON, which stood for boundaries, accountability, consequences, outward appearances, and now. She told us that unless we make boundaries for ourselves, we will cross lines that we will regret. Her own boundaries include never being horizontal on a date, never taking clothes off, and avoiding risky settings, such as a bedroom or a dark park at night. She told us of the benefits of group dating: more friends, more fun. She also emphasized how “important [it is] to find someone with the same boundaries as you.” She advised us to get an “accountability partner”—a best friend, youth counselor, parent, or sibling—who will hold us accountable for maintaining our boundaries.

Lauren spoke of the positive consequences of abstinence and the negative consequences of premarital sex. With waiting comes the comfort of knowing you will not get STDs, be disowned by your parents, or left by your boyfriend. She told us that even when used correctly, condoms are fifty percent effective or less in preventing the transmission of STDs. By waiting to have sex, she said, “you can know that you’re not bringing any emotional hardship into your marriage.” In equating premarital sex with emotional hardship, Lauren reinforced the traditional construction of feminine sexuality as inherently emotional. She also set up a narrative in which a

relationship without sex could never leave one heartbroken. Romantic relationships, so long as they are not overly sexual, apparently will not lead one to “compare” a spouse to previous partners in the way the jagged heart activity described.

Speaking about appearances, Lauren first addressed the boys: “Guys, this is not just for girls. We’ve seen your boxers; they’re not pretty.” But most of her comments were directed at the girls. She reminded us that no “cracks” should be showing, and emphasized that we can “still look good.” After telling us that “you can be pure now,” she summed up “a couple of things [she has] learned: Guys, girls are wired by touch.... And girls, guys are wired visually....” She told the boys to be careful, for example, about touching a girl too low on the back and told girls to dress modestly for the sake of boys. While Lauren gave suggestions to both boys and girls, her advice for girls requires a more constant and vigilant self-regulation. Restrictions on touch versus appearance have a striking asymmetry. While boys are free to display their masculinity in everyday practice and must only regulate themselves in tactile interactions, girls are considered always on display, and must continually regulate their appearance so as to avoid arousing boys around them. Lauren concluded: “The kind of person you are is the kind of person you attract,” and she told us that she has been wearing a silver ring since 2004.

Several parody commercials played, after which a couple walked onstage arguing. They had broken up, but she was angry and trying to talk with him. “I still loved you. We slept together!” she said. “That’s when it got weird,” he replied. “It was like we were married.” She said: “I shared something with you that I can never share with anyone else,” then slapped him and walked offstage.

A video segment showed a girl and boy simultaneously writing letters, their voiceovers alternating and saying things like, “I think of you often, what are you like?” “wait for me,” “sex is a treasure,” “a gift you can share only once,” “how you treat others is a reflection of how you’ll treat me.” They mentioned not comparing each other to previous partners and then signed their letters: “your future husband” and “your future wife.” The audience applauded loudly.

The programming then shifted somewhat from entertainment to confession and testimony, the tone less fun and more serious. An emcee from earlier came onstage, introduced herself as Kim*, and told us she would be talking about “starting over.” She began to tell us about her life. She had what seemed like “the perfect life.” But when her parents got divorced, she moved, and she felt like she “couldn’t control the situation.” About her parents, she said, “I felt like they’d given up on our family. I never want this to happen to me again. I never want to feel this out of control again.” At her new high school, she began “to pretend to be something I wasn’t.” She “dated, crossed some lines, and eventually had sex. After that, the relationship fell apart.” She explained, “All the things I thought sex would fix were the worst things about it.” She began to think that other boys at her high school “will think I have nothing else to offer.” She began partying and “lost the respect of my mother and my brothers.” She was kicked out of the house and “lost control.” Kim got pregnant and had an abortion. “I remember looking at the monitor at my little baby,” she said. Afterward, she “couldn’t wash the guilt away.”

Kim told us how she became “bitter, resentful, regretful,” always “living for today.” She told us, “If you’re living for today, you’re not going to be able to look

yourself in the mirror tomorrow.” Still, she continued partying, but also began to take college courses. A friend brought her to church: “One night, I received Christ into my life and asked him to be my savior. It wasn’t easy—I had to let go of bad friends and bad habits. But I found real friendship and real community.” She continued: “I met a boy. We would go to church together, but then we started crossing lines. I hadn’t set any boundaries,” she said emphatically. “If you don’t have boundaries, nothing’s going to stop you from going all the way.” She “felt like a hypocrite.” Then her friend convinced her to go to the Silver Ring Thing. During the segment with the jagged heart, she thought to herself, “I have so little left.” She decided to start over and since February 2007 has been wearing a ring. “You have to decide you’re worth waiting for,” she said. She reiterated the three “red flags” in her story: “I was pretending to be someone I wasn’t, I was living for today, and I hadn’t set any boundaries.” She encouraged us to think about ourselves—“Where have you been? What do you think about starting over?”—and about the advantages: “no emotional baggage, no STDs, no pregnancy.” She asked, “What about tonight? There is nothing that you’ve done or had done to you that you can’t start over from.” The audience applauded loudly as she walked offstage.

Kim’s story reiterated many of the earlier themes from the Silver Ring Thing: she had been letting uncertainty, low self-esteem, and outside influences distort and deplete her “true self” and her temporal priorities were disordered—she was “living for today.” The personal, confessional style and tone of Kim’s story seemed likely to resonate with potential participants. She revealed herself as vulnerable, as feeling out of control. She admitted having tried to order her environment according to certain

social and romantic scripts—she had thought sex would “fix” things about her relationship, for example—but was left feeling even more out of control. Kim guided the audience through her own traumatic past and described her regaining of control and sense of self in a sort of abreaction. If audience members could identify with any piece of her narrative—and certainly most teenagers have felt out of control or hurt before—Kim’s story had the potential to guide them toward a similar solution. The intertwining of her abstinence pledge and her conversion to evangelical Christianity offered religion as a solution to social and sexual problems, relying heavily on the ritual and power of witnessing.

A video followed, sustaining the more serious tone of this second half of the program. The screen read: “Sex has consequences: emotionally and physically.” A couple fought. “I gave you my virginity!” she yelled at him, “I gave you something I can never give to anyone else, and now you have more important things to do?” He was reluctant to explain his reasons for wanting the relationship to slow down or end, but finally conceded that he had gone to the doctor for his sports team and found out he had herpes. They fought, and he left. We then heard her crying, saying, “Please don’t make the same mistakes that I did.” The screen showed only her silhouette—she was pregnant. This segment portrays the emotional consequences of sex as exclusively female: she, alone, is upset about the breakup, and particularly *because* they had had sex. The physical consequences are also disproportionately feminized: though both partners have herpes, only she is pregnant, and he appears to be uninvolved and unconcerned. Throughout the Silver Ring Thing, there is no scenario in which two partners deal with physical consequences, such as an unplanned

pregnancy, together. Always, it is the girl who must cope on her own. Female audience members are thus led to believe that partnered sex will leave them to suffer consequences alone, and male audience members are never reminded that they are implicated in such consequences. Participants at the Silver Ring Thing are threatened with unplanned or undesirable outcomes, but they are not encouraged to discuss, prevent, or plan for potential consequences *with* their partners.

The last speaker came onto the stage; I recognized him as the bassist from the opening band. He introduced himself as Denny Pattyn—the founder of the Silver Ring Thing. After promoting further Silver Ring Thing programming and merchandise and encouraging everyone to sign up for the Street Team, he spoke about his three daughters. Because of them, he said, he knows that

[y]our generation is doing something that nobody has done before. You're creating a movement that's going worldwide. It's the abstinence movement, and it's all over the U.S. and starting to spread all over the world. This movement is going to be written down in history. You're the generation that finally got fed up with the safe sex, sex-obsessed culture and began an abstinence movement.

Denny's representation of the abstinence movement as a youth initiative is striking. As the adult founder of one of the most widespread abstinence organizations, he himself is an example of the generational split between adult leaders and youthful followers. Additionally, in representing the abstinence movement as a worldwide phenomenon, he invites participants to feel both responsible and powerful.

Denny began to talk about an incident at the 2008 MTV Video Music Awards where the host mocked the Jonas Brothers for wearing purity rings, and singer Jordin Sparks defended them in her short speech. He showed a clip from the *Today Show* detailing the controversy, including a segment in which he himself was interviewed.

In this interview, he asked: “Why? Why attack the Jonas Brothers for wearing purity rings? Are they threatened by a moral message? Where is this fear coming from?” To a question about why people participate in the abstinence movement, he responded by saying that “their soul” draws them in, that they have a “desire to be right with God and to have morals and values.”

The media, Denny said, is “afraid that your generation is going to establish morals again that it’s okay to wait. The media’s job is to lower these values.” He continued, “You’ve seen the consequences of the safe sex, sex-obsessed culture.” He encouraged us to “stand up for something that’s going to change America and is changing the world.”

“So where does faith fit in?” he asked. He held up an Abstinence Bible, a handbook which students receive when they purchase a silver ring. He read a passage from the Book of Matthew: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” He moved into metaphor, talking about asking for directions from two people along a road. One person gives you winding, contradictory directions, and you do not think this person is trustworthy. Another person says, “Oh, that’s where I live,” and allows you to follow him there. “Jesus comes from heaven—he knows how to show you to this gate,” Denny said. “So many of your friends are on the wide gate,” he continued, “It’s so wide they can’t even see the boundaries. They’ll say, ‘I don’t know why I did that.’”

Denny spoke of his own life. “I grew up with atheist parents,” he said. He described doing things with his friends such as burning down a house, implicitly connecting atheism to criminality. “I was a thief, and I liked being a thief,” he said. In high school, he listened to a man speak about religion. At the time, he said, “I thought religion was this church somewhere. I didn’t get that you could have a relationship with God.” He went on a retreat and prayed to turn his life around. “I was serious about it,” Denny said—“for three weeks.” He “prayed that prayer nine times,” but he “kept falling.” One day, on his eighteenth birthday, he was drunk, being driven around with the hood up, and he realized he was a hypocrite. He went back to those meetings and, he said, “I asked Christ to come into my life. From that day on, my life changed.” At this, the audience clapped and cheered. Unlike Kim, whose conversion testimony was explicitly entangled with sex, Denny did not make the connection between abstinence and Christianity so obvious. He constructed his own teenage sins—thrift, arson, drinking—as on equal footing with premarital sex: at once utterly damaging and conquerable through salvation.

“Deciding about this ring is very critical,” Denny said. He told us that sixty-five million Americans are living with incurable STDs. Before the 1960s, he said, people had only syphilis and gonorrhea to worry about, while today there are thirty different diseases. “Teenagers are more susceptible to getting these diseases,” he said, comparing this propensity to a baby’s skin burning more easily in the sun. “Your body as a teenager is still developing sexually. Cells, like those on the cervix, are almost like a magnet to these diseases.” Teenagers make up ten percent of the population in the United States, he said, but twenty-five percent of those infected with

STDs. He told us that oral sex can still transmit STDs, just like “traditional sex.” “You didn’t know that, did you?” he said and told us of someone being diagnosed with gonorrhea of the throat.

He disputed sources that tell teenagers, “Please don’t have unprotected sex,” and warned us, “You’re not protected enough.” “I’d never teach people to depend on a condom,” he continued. “It will never make sex safe enough.” He then put up a list of STDs: chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes, and HPV. HIV was listed separately. He told us that for the first list, condoms reduce the risk of STD transmission by fifty percent, and for HIV, condoms reduce the risk by eighty-five percent. “That’s not good enough for me,” he said, “and I’d never tell my daughters that that’s good enough for them.”

“I don’t know what you’re facing out there,” Denny went on, “but inside of you God has placed a soul, and that’s the gate. Very few people get on that road. Maybe you will.” Denny’s discourse at once insisted that this “road” was open and attainable to everyone at the event, and that it was the privilege of a few. He told us he recently received an email from a teenage girl, and he read it aloud:

I made a mistake with my ex. We decided to lose our virginities to each other. Soon after sex, things got very weird, and we broke up. The thing is, the first time we had sex, the condom broke, and by the grace of God I didn’t get pregnant. My friend told me about the Silver Ring Thing, and I decided I wouldn’t go because I was too ashamed. But I ended up going, and I realized that I had a second chance. Thank you for changing my life.

“Don’t leave here undecided,” Denny urged us. “Make a decision tonight. Don’t just get information in your head. Make a decision. Get a ring, put it on, and on your wedding day, give it to your spouse and tell them: ‘I waited for you.’” He joked that you can then say, “Let’s get it on—I waited a loooong time,” a comment that

elicited much laughter from the crowd, though he quickly added, “Don’t really say that.” He discussed the rings themselves, which have a biblical verse inscribed on them. This passage, from First Thessalonians 4:3-4, states: “God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor.” Denny urged us to “put this ring on tonight; make that decision.”

He led everyone in prayer: “I beg you to ask God to forgive you for everything you’ve done. I pray for these teens who live in this crazy world that we adults have left them. I pray they become part of this movement that’s going to change the world.” He invited those who had decided to to “pray this prayer with me silently.” All around me, heads bowed, as Denny said:

Dear Lord, only you know how much I needed to be here. Thanks for getting me here. I’m ashamed of some of the stuff I’ve been doing, and I need you to forgive me. I need you to be at the center of who I am, at the center of this decision I’m making. Help me to be courageous and to be known for this decision I’m making and to never step back from it.

Students who recited this prayer were asked at the end of the program to come to the front. The number of students who do this at each event are listed on the website as having “made either first-time or recommitments to Jesus Christ.” The website reports that, at this event, forty students made this commitment.

Denny then led all the attendees in the official pledge. He held up the Abstinence Bible, telling us to sign our names to the pledge on the first page as soon as we receive them. He also told us, within the next day or two, to “find an accountability partner” of the same gender who will check up on us to see if we are upholding the pledge.

In preparation for the pledge, everyone rose, and the screens filled with scrolling words as everyone read together:

In signing this covenant before God Almighty, I _____, agree to wear a silver ring as a sign of my pledge to abstain from sexual behavior that is inconsistent with Biblical standards. On my wedding day, I will present my silver ring to my spouse, representing my faithful commitment to the marriage covenant.

Everyone clapped, and Denny told us to line up outside the door to pick up our rings. He also asked those who recited the prayer with him—ostensibly, those who were “born-again”—to come to the front so that he could collect their names and email addresses. Outside, crowded lines formed with excited teenagers milling about and waiting for their rings. They posed for pictures, holding up their left hands and their Abstinence Bibles. These pictures appeared promptly on the Silver Ring Thing website the next day, along with the news that 191 of the 550 attendees “received [purchased] a ring to symbolize their abstinence decision.” I tried to speak with a few students about whether they had a good time but got mostly one-word affirmative answers.

The Silver Ring Thing was designed for a different audience than the Purity Ball. While both events were for mixed-gender middle and high school students and were sponsored by Christian organizations, they took diverse approaches in speaking to participants. The Silver Ring Thing positioned its primarily white audience as conversant with mainstream youth culture. Thus while its speakers tried to convince participants that they were “in this world but not of this world,” they also used cultural references—funny, raunchy clips from teen movies, parodies of commercials by Apple Computers, eHarmony, and MasterCard—to draw their audience in.

Compared to the Purity Ball, the Silver Ring Thing seemed to consider its audience more culturally competent, able to negotiate “harmful” influences, and it worked with popular cultural tropes instead of just denouncing them. The Silver Ring Thing also imagined its participants to be more able to balance boundaries and conflicting messages. While the Purity Ball conflated relationships and sex and urged participants to forgo romance altogether (until an unspecified later time), the Silver Ring Thing emphasized that it is both possible and appropriate to date and still abstain from premarital sex. It addressed young people as being unlikely to give up dating indefinitely, but capable of reworking the boundaries of teenage relationships with appropriate guidance.

The Silver Ring Thing shares the Purity Ball’s religious investment and presents sexual morality as of divine and inherent importance. But crucially, though the Silver Ring Thing speaks to diverse communities across the country, as an organization, it perhaps does not have the same concern with performing and proving respectability traditionally denied from its participants. The Silver Ring Thing—founded by a white evangelical couple—imagines its constituency as an ideological minority, but not as a racial or class minority. It seems more concerned with constructing abstinence as “cool” than with using abstinence to make a claim to historically denied respectability.

Like the Purity Ball, the Silver Ring Thing was a highly performative and ideally transformative event. Except for a handful of moments of audience-participation, attendees at the Silver Ring Thing were observers to most of the programming. Their attention jolted from skits to mock-commercials to personal

testimonies, and both the form and the content were surprising and engaging whether or not one agreed with their ideology. The event narrative associated confusion and heartache with a literal loss of self and presented a lasting solution through a ritualized and valorized renunciation of sexual activity. In other words, the Silver Ring Thing reframed familiar teenage problems in a particular way, and then presented a singular solution to the problems as it imagined them. An undeniably fun event was presumed to embody the whole of movement culture, and the alternative—not pledging, having premarital sex—was depicted as devastating, guilt-inducing, and self-destructive. The construction of the abstinence pledge as a “born-again” experience—modeled through both Kim’s and Denny’s stories—as well as the tangible performance of the pledge and the ring aimed to create a transformative experience for participants.

Chapter Four
Hook Up or Opt Out: College Abstinence Clubs

At both the Purity Ball and the Silver Ring Thing, organizers spoke to participants as adolescents, attributing to them varying degrees of immaturity, insecurity, impulsiveness, and innocence. The mode of address was consistent with the ideology of adolescence as the protracted transition from childhood to adulthood. Within this narrative, adolescents have sexual desires but lack the maturity to manage them. The address at the events for younger students also reflected and reinforced associations of sex in middle and high school with peer pressure and parental rebellion. These anxieties about adolescent sexuality are not unique to advocates of abstinence; many sexual liberals are of the opinion that while teenagers need and deserve to learn about sexuality, it would be better for them not to have sex until they are older.¹⁸

Sex has very different connotations for college students, who are seen as transitioning out of adolescence and into young adulthood. College is widely regarded as a time for experimenting with or simply experiencing one's first adult relationships. Thus while teenage sex continues to be controversial even in liberal discourse, sex in college is far less contentious, and the message of abstinence circulates and resonates differently among high school and college students.

Although abstinence programming for high school students uses young speakers and advocates, it is generally propelled by institutional and adult organizers.

¹⁸ Others criticize this pattern as a concession of liberal sexual ideology to the terms set by the abstinence movement (Herzog 2008: 124).

And while programs like the Silver Ring Thing have recently expanded their scope to hold similar programs for college students, for the most part there is not the same division between advocates and followers at the college level. College students engaged in the abstinence movement have largely started their own clubs and taken their own steps to support one another and spread their message. These campus-based abstinence clubs are a recent phenomenon, and so far they are predominantly located at elite private colleges and universities. Along with their “grassroots” nature, the most significant difference between these clubs and the pledge events I attended is that the college clubs present themselves as secular.

I communicated with five college students—four of whom I discuss in this chapter—from different campus clubs. I spoke with them about sexual norms on campus, their own motivations for abstinence, and the clubs that they help to run. They presented themselves to me as individuals, rather than as spokespeople for their organizations. Their responses were nuanced, sometimes echoing the Christian Right and at other times incorporating seemingly liberal and feminist language and ideas.

Jonathan

The Anscombe Society at Princeton was the first of these clubs to be founded, and since its inception in 2005, it has grown in membership and recognition, both on- and off-campus. Its website describes the Anscombe Society as “a student organization...dedicated to affirming the importance of the family, marriage, and a proper understanding for the role of sex and sexuality.”

I communicated by email with Jonathan, the current president, regarding sexual attitudes and norms at Princeton. He wrote:

The Hookup Culture is prevalent at Princeton, just as at most colleges across the nation. There is a prevailing sense of taking sex in a cavalier manner, as nothing more than an activity that satisfies basic human desires. Casual sex is seen as a normal activity, and the University's policies aid this way of thinking with Freshman Orientation programming that enforces the expectation of casual sex being a normal thing that everyone participates in, with health policies regarding free and available condoms through University Health Services or Residential Community Advisors. The campus newspaper has a regular "sexpert" column and Freshman Orientation activities like "Sex Jeopardy" [technically "*Safer Sex Jeopardy*"] where facts and trivia are passed on to incoming freshmen while stressing the normality of casual sex (or purported health benefits of casual sex!) and reminding students to be "open minded" about their sexuality.

Jonathan posits a reified—indeed, capitalized—"Hookup Culture" as the campus norm. He is critical of both students' ideology and university policy, positioning oppositional intervention as necessary on both peer-based and official levels. His scorn for the view of "casual sex" as "normal" and to be taken "in a cavalier manner" suggests an understanding of sex as sacred and as illegitimate outside marriage.

Jonathan described his motivations for abstinence and what it meant to him.

He wrote:

For me, abstinence is a lifestyle choice founded on fundamental moral principles, and supported by evidence and reasons from various disciplines, including medicine, history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, etc. If sex is a consummation of the unity between husband and wife, an act that confirms the mutual commitment between a man and woman on the spiritual, emotional, and physical planes, then fidelity within a marriage is necessary and morally good. Abstinence is simply fidelity to a future spouse.

Jonathan refers to abstinence as a "choice," but this choice is not the relativist choice of sexual liberals. Rather, as I argued in Chapter Two, it is based on either accepting or rejecting a single set of "fundamental moral principles." For Jonathan, morality is

the basis for choosing abstinence, though other disciplines offer confirming evidence.

He explained:

...there are numerous practical reasons to support this view. Marriage and family are the building blocks of civilization and to preserve them in stable and healthy form is good for society. Studies have shown that stable, loving marriages are the best environments for raising children, produce the happiest men and women, and reinforce community values of fidelity and commitment. It is healthier to save sex for marriage, not only because it lowers the risks of STDs but also because of the psychological and hormonal effects.

Though Jonathan begins with a moral explanation, he quickly lists both individual and social benefits of premarital abstinence and marriage. Compared with the rhetoric of high school abstinence programming, Jonathan seems to focus more on the positive consequences of abstinence than on the negative consequences of premarital sex, emphasizing the benefits of marriage over the risks of STIs.

Only after this lengthy list of benefits does Jonathan bring up religion. “I am a Christian,” he explained, “and so my first ideas of sex and marriage were formed from theological and religious grounds.” However, he added that these “religious convictions later went hand in hand with...explorations of the nature of fundamental and natural laws and morals.” As a result, he “became convinced that not only were there Biblical reasons to follow an abstinent lifestyle, but that my commitments to human dignity, sex properly understood, and the sanctity of marriage also required a commitment to abstinence.” For Jonathan, the Christian perspective on sex was a starting point that expanded into a universal moral standard.

Jonathan’s list of “practical” arguments for abstinence seems to have grown out of his time with the Anscombe Society, which makes a significant effort to frame its arguments as secular and rational. The Anscombe Society calls itself “a proactive

community that provides social support and a voice for those already committed to these values, and promotes intellectual engagement to further discussion and understanding of this ethic on Princeton's campus and in the broader community." It maintains a website with position statements and links to further reading and resources on topics such as Family and Marriage, Sexual Ethics and Chastity, Sexuality and Feminism, and Homosexuality.

Jonathan came across the club by chance, but decided that he wanted to "get involved, as sexual ethics seemed to be a topic that was immensely important, yet was likely to be contentious in the University." In response to a question about what he has gained from being a part of the club, he wrote:

I have been able to sharpen my arguments and reasons for choosing to live an abstinent pre-marital life, I have been able to meet many people and encourage them in their choice to live similarly. I have gained a greater appreciation for the importance of a commitment to rational discourse and calm deliberation and argument. I have gained many close friendships and shared experiences which I will treasure in the times to come.

Being a part of the Anscombe Society provided Jonathan with new ways of being in relation to his peers. He found a like-minded community that not only shared but strengthened his beliefs. It increased his ability to engage in "rational discourse" on abstinence and sex with the majority of his peers, who seem to disagree with him.

As a self-declared Christian and social conservative, Jonathan perceives himself to be a minority on a liberal college campus. In speaking about sexual attitudes at Princeton, he said that despite the prevalence of the hookup culture,

...Princeton is not as bad a place as many other campuses, since there is a respect for healthy rational discourse. If a student believes in abstinence, he may be laughed at a little bit, but if he has well-reasoned arguments, he is still taken seriously. [...] At Princeton, any voice with well-reasoned arguments has a say and is treated with respect.

Jonathan's concern with not being taken seriously—and his insistence that he and his club indeed are treated respectfully—highlights the importance of peer perceptions and relative social standing related to matters of sex. Framing chastity and abstinence as the result of rational, intellectual considerations seems to be a central tactic for overcoming the anticipated disapproval of student peers and promoting abstinence at Princeton.

This idea was supported by Jonathan's answer to my question about the campus perception of the Anscombe Society. Unlike the Silver Ring Thing, where the success of each event is defined by the number of participants who purchase a ring (and presumably pledge abstinence), Jonathan seems to define the success of the group by its ability to join the campus conversation on sexuality: to be heard respectfully, if not to be uniformly convincing. He wrote:

At first we were not taken seriously. However, as we maintained a strong presence and become more and more engaged with the rest of campus, people began to take notice and treat us as a force and presence at the University. We are now known around campus, and people know what we stand for (with a few misconceptions here and there). The campus publications come to us for comment on news relevant to the issues we address, and there have been both hostile and friendly fire in conversations and in campus publications. The University administration takes us seriously and has met with us to discuss University policy reform, and we have seen results from our efforts. Our talks and events are well attended, and we have, after three years, become accepted as a serious group, with well-reasoned arguments, even if not everyone on campus agrees with us.

Jonathan's initially religious justifications for abstinence may have been risky beliefs to espouse publicly at a liberal university. But the Anscombe Society offered him a way to present his position in socially acceptable terms, which at Princeton means secular, hyper-intellectual, and rationally sound arguments. Abstinence, for

Jonathan, is something to be dealt with more philosophically than physically or emotionally, and more abstractly than personally. He preempts criticism of his moral ideology and works hard to be taken seriously by his peers.

Brandon

I also communicated by email with Brandon, another member of the Anscombe Society. Brandon took a different approach from Jonathan in constructing the problem of mainstream sexual culture. Rather than write off “hooking up” as a self-evident problem, he explained in detail what frustrated him about the dominant sexual culture. He wrote:

I am frustrated particularly with the nonchalance shown toward the very serious social, moral, and health issues that surround the topic of sex. In television shows and movies, premarital and even teenage sex is generally treated not as a very intense life choice but as a social expectation, something to be assumed. In popular media, and far too often on college campuses, the terms boyfriend and girlfriend are simply shorthand for “he or she with whom one is currently having sex” rather than as signifying a special emotional bond of mutual respect and love, perhaps even geared toward (*gasp*) marriage.

At Princeton, surrounded by some of the brightest minds in the world, it is particularly frustrating that so few actually take the time to consider the social, philosophical, and personal ramifications of sexual activity, instead simply bowing to the common assumption that sex is an expected (and inconsequential) part of social life, even an integral part of youth. (If I were to write that sentence in one of my columns, I would immediately be reprimanded in a very offended e-mail saying that my peers do consider all the ramifications of sex but have come to a different conclusion than I.¹⁹ My experience suggests that that assertion is naïvely optimistic.) So much about sex is assumed rather than examined.

Brandon depicts both an ideal—mutually respectful, loving relationships and marriage—and the downsides of not striving for this ideal—the “ramifications of

¹⁹ Brandon writes for a conservative magazine at Princeton.

[premarital] sexual activity.” He also emphasizes that “religion need not be used in defense of abstinence. The relevant social, moral and health concerns are certainly strong enough without recourse to religion.” Like Jonathan, he argues for a single standard of sexual conduct, and he contends that those making other choices have not adequately weighed the potential benefits and consequences of their decisions. He asserts his own standard not only as better but as an educated, reasoned choice rather than one based on naïve assumptions.

Brandon positions himself as sophisticated, mature, and thoughtful in contrast to his unreflective, sexually liberal peers. In response to a question about his opinions on colleges’ promoting safer sex and sponsoring programs and services such as free condom distribution, he wrote:

Safe sex is obviously a good thing, and colleges should clearly support it. My problem with programs like giving away free condoms is the assumptions that it reveals. What free condom events say is: “Sex is going to happen at college. A lot. And it’s going to happen so spontaneously that condoms must be freely available all the time.” But that first statement is a self-fulfilling prophecy. What better way to ensure that sex happens a lot than to a) remove a very superficial barrier (getting condoms) and b) tell young, impressionable students whose ideas about sex are not fully formed that the university administration expects students to have lots of hook-ups. It plays into what a Princeton psychology thesis called “pluralistic ignorance,” which at Princeton and other colleges manifests itself as students have a nearly universally high estimation of exactly how much sex is going on, feeding a pernicious social expectation.

Brandon articulates the popular claim within the abstinence movement that providing condoms will encourage and pressure students to have sex. Crucially, he frames his concern over condom distribution as troublesome for other, more impressionable students, and not for himself. Like Jonathan, Brandon asserts that abstinence is the choice of the genuinely educated, intellectually engaged, and rational person. But

while Jonathan seems most concerned with having his views taken seriously—on equally intellectual ground with liberal ideas—Brandon condescends to his liberal peers, whom he portrays as naïve. The information that the liberal university likely provides—on the moral neutrality of consensual and careful premarital sex—is to Brandon a cause of “pluralistic ignorance” rather than a fair and adequate treatment of sexuality.

I wanted to know what Brandon had gained from being a part of the Anscombe Society. He wrote:

Besides the cliché answers like “some great friends...yay!” and “community,” which are certainly true, the number one thing has been understanding the philosophical, intellectual, and ethical foundations for many of the things that, through my upbringing, I always thought I believed, but could never quite articulate why outside of simply, “Well, I’m a traditionalist...so there.”

Brandon described the Anscombe Society as “at its core an intellectual organization, not a protest group.” This intellectual engagement allows Brandon to associate contemplative rationality with a position that is not always taken seriously. He explained, “I’m always concerned that abstinence is portrayed as either a quaint Victorian holdover or only a religious thing.” Brandon’s involvement with Anscombe allows him to anticipate and disprove these criticisms on a local level by making his position heard at Princeton.

Rachel

Students at Harvard University started True Love Revolution in 2006. While they admired Princeton’s Anscombe Society, they took a decidedly less

philosophical, abstract approach to abstinence and chastity. They thought that concrete and scientific justifications would go over better with Harvard students, and they structured their public presence around the idea that abstinence could offer a healthier and happier alternative (Patterson 2008). Their website argues for abstinence as “a positive alternative for ethical and health reasons.”

I communicated with Rachel, the current co-president of True Love Revolution, by email. Her motivations for abstinence were very different from those given by the young men I had previously heard from. She wrote:

Ultimately, I want sexual autonomy from men when it comes to my body. I want to unravel the ineffable mystery of true love in my future. I want my future husband to understand that true love does not operate on a start-stop system. If humanity wants love to last forever, then why do we not begin now by choosing to honor our future mates despite the temptation to embark on our own guess and check journey where we end up losing far more than we gain? [...] Acting the part of even a sexless star-crossed lover with any boyfriend who comes along raises serious concerns about promoting a future husband’s well-being. Scattering letters filled with emotion, whispering passionate nothings, and leaving behind bits of myself along the way subtracts from an overall commitment to love.

Abstinence is pursuing life to the fullest while waiting for marriage to engage in activities that ignite deep emotions. Although waiting for sex is a testament to its worth, it is more importantly a testament to the worth of life’s other opportunities. As I free myself from the consuming power of sex and love for the time being, I free myself to live strongly.

Rachel’s explanation is nuanced. She begins with a seemingly feminist sentiment about wanting “sexual autonomy from men” and then moves seamlessly into a narrative of romance by speaking about “the ineffable mystery of true love.” Rachel infers that “guess and check” relationships cause only loss, and she worries about “leaving bits of [herself] behind,” describing a finite self that would be depleted by impermanent intimacy. For Rachel, premarital sex (and, apparently, romance) only

distract from other opportunities, and abstaining offers a means of self-affirmation that enables her to realize herself in the present. Though powerful, this strategy is admittedly temporary; Rachel writes of abstinence as freeing “for the time being.”

I asked Rachel why she thought True Love Revolution and similar clubs had been started in the last few years, and she wrote:

Students are ready to make public their sexual views, which I think is very healthy, especially at universities where people go out of their way to condone sexual relations. It is definitely taking a social risk to join abstinence groups because the clubs are notorious and ridiculed. The majority of the student body has no intention of raising hell with abstinence clubs, but that sentiment is out there, and it is intimidating. Students need a forum where it is okay to place value on sex. These communities also place value on a person’s self-worth outside of their ability to woo and be wooed. These groups are filled with people who are free to walk their own journeys with unencumbered spirits.

Rachel’s explanation highlights the importance of basing self-worth on factors other than romance and sex, a departure from traditional assumptions that women value relationships above personal education or career goals, in contrast to men who are free to pursue autonomy and achievement before relationships.

Rachel also described what she has gained from being a member and a leader of True Love Revolution, saying, “I am learning how to articulate my beliefs about sexual abstinence, personal strength, and how to convey the power of controlling sex rather than having it control you.” For Rachel, abstinence is a means of preempting what she understands to be potentially all-consuming and eventually depleting. She avoids romance and sex—for now—as a means of ensuring both her independence of body and mind and her “commitment to love” with a future husband.

Andrea

There are abstinence clubs outside the Ivy League, as well. At Arizona State University, students started the New Sexual Revolution in 2006. Interestingly, they did not model their club after Princeton's and only found out about other abstinence clubs after they had begun to establish their own. I spoke by phone with Andrea, a founding member of the club. I asked her what she thought of sexual norms on campus, and she said:

ASU is the number one Playboy party school, so we've got our work cut out for us. I think it's pretty typical of most college campuses. A lot of people are having sex within committed relationships, but there are a lot of casual one night stands, and that's a whole different issue. I figure it's probably pretty typical.

Unlike the other students I corresponded with, Andrea acknowledges the existence of sexual relationships outside the confines of the hookup culture. However, she considers the prevalence of a party environment and the frequency of casual sex to be sufficiently worrisome to warrant a counter-response.

When Andrea and I spoke about her own reasons for abstaining, her answer was complex, incorporating several justifications and defenses for her opinions. She said:

...abortion...[is] not an option for me, so I don't want to get pregnant. [...] I don't want to bring a child into this world if I'm not ready to care for it, and I don't want to be bringing STDs or anything into marriage. Also, when I do get married, I want to be able to be a gift for my husband—not like an archaic idea that my virginity is the only thing I have to offer, but that I can be totally available and not have any baggage to bring into it.

I am Catholic, so that was a large motivation for me, as well, and just reading more about the beauty of the Church's teaching on sexuality which I largely misunderstood until a couple years ago. I think that there's a misconception

that the Church is really prudish when it comes to sexuality, and that the Church is telling us what to do in our bedroom, and it's just a bunch of celibate men trying to lay down the law.... [...] But the more that I read, I found that the opposite is true, the Church [has a] more beautiful understanding of what kind of expression sexuality is than I have ever found anywhere else.

Andrea cites practical precautions—avoiding pregnancy and STIs—as well as religious motivations for abstinence. Most interesting to me is her desire “to be a gift for [her] husband.” She does not say she wants to *give* a gift—as at the Silver Ring Thing—but to *be* a gift. She speaks not of giving her virginity, per se, but of giving herself as “totally available” and without “baggage.” She is self-conscious of sounding “archaic” and preempts this criticism; nevertheless, her justification implies a more traditional notion of a finite self that can be both depleted and weighed down by “baggage,” but not enhanced by impermanent intimacy.

Andrea is the only student I spoke with who talked about abstinence and sex as both personal and present concerns. While Rachel mentioned a future marriage and “true love,” she is apparently avoiding romance in the present. Andrea, however, has been in a relationship for four years and is engaged to be married in a few months, just after she graduates. She said:

I myself am engaged.... We've been committed to abstinence up until this point and intend to abstain until the wedding. I think a lot of the misunderstanding of why someone would wait that long comes from—I don't want to say an inadequate understanding of sexuality, but for us it's not just a physical thing. I don't think that for everyone else it's just a physical thing, but for us it's us giving ourselves to each other completely and not holding anything back.

And so within the context of marriage we've committed our lives together...I don't have to be worried that he's going to leave me or worried that he's comparing me to anybody else, which, it's actually really strange for me to think about it that way. And on his end too, you know I'm never going to be talking about his performance with anybody or comparing him to other guys.

If we're really going to be able to experience the fullness of sexual intimacy, then it has to be a completely committed, comfortable environment where we can be that vulnerable.

In talking about her relationship, Andrea expands on the gift metaphor: both she and her future husband will give themselves to each other. She also calls upon the idea of “comparing,” insisting that one will always think of previous sexual partners during future sexual intimacy, presumably either with regret or longing. Andrea talks about “vulnerability,” implying that it is both necessary for true intimacy and harmful without sufficient commitment. Vulnerability out of context—out of marriage—presents a threat, and abstaining seems to provide a means of evading this threat.

Andrea and I spoke about the campus reaction to the New Sexual Revolution, and she talked about its attention-drawing name as turning away potentially interested people, but arousing curiosity in the majority of students. She said:

...people think we're sort of silly or naïve, [but] if we can actually talk to them, I think they come away at least respecting our decision. We try to bring in a lot of modern psychology, and we do bring in sexual decorum and sexual arousal, and those are hard to debate. I think if we're allowed to have conversations with people, they come away [thinking], “Well, okay, not for me, but not as crazy as I thought.”

Like the other students, Andrea expresses concern over being ignored or mocked by her peers, and she considers it a victory when she is listened to and taken seriously, even if she does not convince other students.

Twenty minutes after our thirty-minute conversation, Andrea called me back with one more thing she wanted me to know. She said:

As far as perceptions on campus, a lot of times when I talk to people and tell them that I've chosen to abstain, their impression is that I must not have any sort of sex drive. I have to explain to them, that no, [that is] far from the truth. People are kind of in disbelief that I've been dating my now-fiancé for four

years and we haven't had sex, and I usually have to explain to people that it has been a struggle.

In talking about her own “struggle” to abstain, Andrea departs significantly from Jonathan and Brandon’s philosophical discussions, acknowledging abstinence not only as an ideology, but as an everyday practice of bodily restraint of desire.

Abstaining in College

College students involved with abstinence clubs construct the problem of premarital sex and the solution—abstaining from sex—in varying and nuanced ways. As at the high school pledge events, leaders of college clubs present a variety of justifications—moral, ethical, social, psychological, health, religious—for premarital abstinence and chastity. But rather than advising and addressing a younger audience, they are talking about and to themselves and their peers. Because of this, they must consistently engage with mainstream sexual ideology.

Participants in the movement at the college level are heavily involved with critique and reform of gender relations. The liberal sexual ideology that circulates on college campuses—likely expounded by programs such as Princeton’s “Safer Sex Jeopardy”—insists that men and women have both equal freedoms and equal responsibilities surrounding sex. But lived experience suggests otherwise; a difference in the ramifications of sexual activity for men and women persists, a point on which sexual liberals and conservatives agree, though for different reasons. For sexual liberals, the difference is cultural: there remains a sexual double standard in which sexual promiscuity is likely to lower a woman’s social standing while elevating

a man's. Like men, women are expected to be sexually active; unlike men, women may be derided for sexual experience that is perceived as "too much" or "too soon." For sexual conservatives, the difference is inherent in the different natures of women and men: women are bound to suffer if they act sexually in ways that are contrary to their essential needs and hopes. Abstinent college students thus face a contradictory and confusing sexual culture—as do all college students. In response, I argue, they tend to essentialize these complexities, attributing all sexual activity among college students to an all-inclusive "hookup culture," equating premarital sex with casual sex.

Exaggerating and reifying the hookup culture is perhaps the most overt way in which abstinent college students engage with mainstream sexual discourse. Hooking up is seen as having "replaced" dating and relationships, pressuring young adults (but particularly women) into near compulsory sexual activity that leads to inevitable disappointment and hurt. This idea incorporates historical constructions of sexual excess and promiscuity as responsible for the ills of society, but more so it (often sympathetically) psychologizes and individualizes the consequences of premarital sex for young people. The hookup culture is portrayed as widespread, pervasive, a monolithic norm; this extreme picture tends to obscure or deny any other romantic and sexual possibilities. The oversimplified, demonized depiction of the hookup culture constructs the abstinence movement as a moderate, reasonable, and compassionate reaction against a sexually excessive mainstream culture.

Reducing the entirety of romantic and sexual options in college to hooking up is limiting and potentially frightening to those who do not fit into this model, either by choice or by circumstance. Students who deviate from this supposed norm may be

anxious about not belonging among their peers. Rather than risk social isolation or ridicule, these particular students define for themselves a new standard—abstinence—and construct themselves as countercultural. In choosing to voluntarily abstain from sex—or even romance altogether—students reject a represented culture before it can reject them. They do not simply condemn the hookup culture—they also create (or recreate) an alternative narrative for sex and romance. Premarital abstinence gives students the ability to rewrite romance and sex in ways that fill their needs better than dominant romantic and sexual scripts. This involves reworking the rules of involvement and the definition of social and sexual success. For abstinent college students, success is measured not in present engagement with interpersonal intimacy but in eventual marriage and “true love.” In this narrative, premarital sex is not only distinct from but detrimental to future fulfillment.

Sexuality is typically defined by “doings.” Each sexual act or each sexual partner is a new “doing,” and virginity, in this perspective, is defined as a lack of or an opposition to an expected “doing.” But for abstinence to be an effective social and sexual strategy and a credible identity, students rework a passive “not doing”—not having sex—into a voluntary practice, an active “not-doing”—abstaining (Mullaney 2006). In addressing and comparing themselves to their peers, students make their abstinence visible through language, constructing it as both a logical strategy and a moral value. These college clubs provide students with a language with which to locate themselves and their beliefs. They present their ideas and emotions in culturally appropriate forms; for example, many of the students I spoke with seemed

to enhance or replace religiously inspired reasons with philosophical and scientific ones.

These students frame their own arguments as complex and thoughtfully established in contrast to liberal sexual ideologies that are supposedly reached without sufficient consideration. As Brandon said, he considers it “naïvely optimistic” to think that his sexually liberal peers “consider all the ramifications of sex but have come to a different conclusion.” Thus abstinent college students position themselves as more thoughtful, logical, and mature with their choice of conduct. As Wilkins (2008) suggests, they reject youth social hierarchies of coolness and make a claim to adult conservative values. So while their choices may yield temporary negative social consequences, they are building a type of character that is associated with middle-class adult life. They trade middle-class youthful consumption and indulgence for a version of middle-class adult respectability. By abstaining, they associate themselves with historically classed qualities such as discipline, purity, and moral righteousness.

Besides offering an ideological means of distinguishing themselves from their peers, abstinence clubs, like other youth subcultures, also provide students with a literal and imagined community. Subcultural practices and identities among youth are far from new, but as mainstream culture changes, so too do subcultures. In response to an increasingly permissive culture, more subcultures—such as the “straightedge” subculture and the abstinence movement—denounce these indulgent lifestyles and construct subcultural identities that are more aligned with traditional claims to respectability.²⁰

²⁰ Young people who define themselves as “straightedge” construct their identity around actively abstaining from drugs and alcohol, and sometimes sex.

Students benefit from both a group of peers and an affiliation with the larger campus-based abstinence movement. After she graduated from Princeton in 2007, Casey, one of the founders of the Anscombe Society, created the Love and Fidelity Network, which aims “to equip college students with the arguments, resources, and direction they need to uphold the institution of marriage, the special role of the family, and the ethic of chastity on their campus.” The Love and Fidelity Network held an intercollegiate conference in November 2008. Entitled “Sexuality, Integrity, and the University,” it brought together speakers on the social, economic, psychological, and medical implications of sexuality and chastity and drew students from eighteen universities. This conference was the first of its kind, and it aimed to foster both a communal and intellectual environment, bolstering the college abstinence movement as an ideologically driven subculture.

Sexuality on college campuses, of course, has a reciprocal relationship not only with social expectations and peer hierarchies of coolness but with individual desire, fulfillment, and interpersonal intimacy. Anxieties about not being loved and desired intimately are surely not unique to abstinent students, but abstinence is one way of managing such fears. Rachel speaks most strongly to the solution that abstinence offers for this anxiety. She discusses True Love Revolution as a community that “place[s] value on a person’s self-worth outside of their ability to woo and be wooed.” This evasion of romantic affirmation holds a certain appeal, and Rachel is adamant about her freedom from sex and love as freedom to “live strongly” and “pursu[e] life to the fullest.” This strategy, however, is temporary. While abstaining from sex—and, sometimes, dating—limits the immediate possibility of

sexual or romantic rejection, it also limits the possibility of affirming one's ability to be loved and desired. Rachel imagines future love and marriage in all its "ineffable mystery," rewriting a story of romance and intimacy for a vaguely defined future. These romantic scripts can be realized only if certain rules—romantic and/or sexual abstinence—are followed.

Abstinence opens up opportunities for other aspects of life for Rachel, but it also certainly has to do with sex. She delights in "the power of controlling sex rather than having it control [her]." By framing abstinence as a mature, educated decision, college students adopt and appeal to liberal notions of personal growth. However, they construct this growth as coming only from a proactive choice to limit or avoid sexual situations, never from lived experiences of interpersonal intimacy. In this view, while choosing to abstain asserts one's agency (Wilkins 2008), sexual activity does not. Movement ideology presumes that "premature" experiences of sex and love happen *to* you, as a result of peer pressure, and can only harm or deplete you.

A choice to abstain from sex is a preemptive solution to widely experienced anxieties and uncertainties, to fears of being hurt and feeling vulnerable. Abstinent students assert control by adhering to objective rules rather than playing out subjective desires. To members of these clubs, abstinence offers a promise of future rewards—happier, healthier marriages—in return for abstaining from the present complexities of sex and love.

While participation in these abstinence clubs certainly addresses a variety of problems, it does not solve them entirely. The students I interviewed are hyperaware of themselves as a minority group; they know they stand out and are concerned they

are not being taken seriously. Abstinence as a solution to the complexities of sexuality and gender among college students is not a onetime fix but a continual process of negotiation.

Conclusion

As a young woman in college, I was aware that undertaking an analytical project on youth sexual culture held the risk of getting too personal. I began my research with a critical view of the contemporary sexual abstinence movement, and I used this view to distance myself from a discourse that includes me in its address. The way leaders and authors in the movement address young people seemed offensive and unfair, and I did not understand how participants could find this particular version of abstinence (moralized, absolute, and until marriage) to be an appealing option. Through my research, however, while I have not abandoned my critical view, I have supplemented it with nuanced understandings of the movement's appeals. I began to see how abstinence discourse could resonate with young people's lived experiences. In fact, as critical as I was, at times it resonated with mine.

It was in reading Laura Sessions Stepp's *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both* (2007) that I found myself drawn into the movement's narrative about the problems with contemporary sexual culture. Because the book is about college women, I preempted a potentially personal reaction to it by categorizing it in particular ways. I wrote off the book as an exposé of the hookup culture, selectively featuring women who participate (or have participated) in this culture and who have become disillusioned or dissatisfied with it, while ignoring other experiences and perspectives. Throughout *Unhooked*, Stepp narrates the serial sexual and romantic involvements of pseudonymed young women as they navigate

the college sexual scene, often facing disappointment and heartache. Some of them also experience assault and rape, which Stepp treats as consequences of the hookup culture, ignoring their frequency outside it, including within marriage. Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings, I found *Unhooked* upsetting and compelling.

Even though my own experience departs significantly from many of the tropes of the hookup culture—sexual encounters based around excessive alcohol, fraternity parties and bars, and one-night stands—I identified with many of the anxieties that the young women in the book expressed. I do not generally feel social pressure to be romantically or sexually involved at a given time, but I often feel that it is expected of me to have a backlog of such stories and experiences to draw upon in social situations—a sexual capital of sorts. I have worried about being abnormal and undesirable when unattached, and I have worried about losing my independence when in a committed relationship. I have been conscious of—and conflicted about—distinguishing my personal sexual boundaries from those that seem socially normative. Like the young women Stepp describes, I have had a hard time when my experiences contradict or undermine my philosophies on dating and sex, and I feel frustrated and confused when I cannot reason away my reactions to complex interpersonal situations.

While reading *Unhooked*, I began to view the whole of college sexual culture through the narrative of the hookup culture. The power of (even indirect) testimony in the text overrode my preemptive categorization of these women's experiences as extreme and unrepresentative. Because a few elements of the young women's stories resonated with my own experiences and anxieties, I began to identify with the entirety

of their stories. I saw my own and my friends' experiences as passive reflections of this supposed culture, projecting onto our lives the negative consequences that Stepp's informants had faced. As I became increasingly distressed with what seemed like limited and doomed options for romance and sex, I began to wish I could opt out of these realms entirely.

I had numerous conversations with friends to which I brought a convoluted combination of conservative and feminist critique of campus sex and romance. Their responses reminded me of the expressive potential of interpersonal experiences, as well as their inevitable complexity. When I described my mounting concerns with sexual trends on campus, my friends reminded me that sex at Wesleyan does not fit so neatly under the umbrella of "the hookup culture" and suggested that my own sexual conduct should not be reduced to an expression of objective cultural forces. And when I expressed my utter frustration that intellectualizing sex and relationships did not make them any less confusing, two friends separately explained, "Well, yes—that's because you're a person." My friends' liberal explanations echoed back to me ideas that I strongly believed before (and after) my research, but my uncertainty upon reading some of the more salient movement texts speaks to the power of abstinence discourse to represent and problematize sexual culture in a particularly powerful way. Movement discourse presents an essentialized representation of contemporary sexual culture as an overwhelming force that resonates with aspects of young people's lived experiences—including my own.

Abstinence discourse constructs one solution—positioned as the sole solution—to a widely experienced problem: contradictory and problematic cultural

narratives about sex and love, particularly as they concern teenagers and young adults. And as evidenced by my own response (albeit temporary), the movement's singular narrative of problem and solution can be appealing. Abstinence as a monolithic solution to anxieties about desire, intimacy, self-worth, and reputation offers its adherents certain benefits. It (re-)establishes a narrative in which following strict rules for social and sexual interaction is the sole route to virtuous and happy love, sex, and selfhood. It takes the moral, psychological, and intellectual high ground and promises to reward self-restraint with self-fulfillment, giving participants a feeling of control in the highly uncertain realm of romance and sex. Abstinence events, clubs, literature, and discourse create a language and a community within which participants evade the ambiguities and uncertainties of erotic life and reinvent themselves as moral subjects.

In spite of these benefits, however, I maintain that abstinence as a singular solution has significant weaknesses and costs. While abstinence is nominally open to everyone, it remains unequal along lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Much of this inequality was at first invisible to me, and for good reason: as a young white woman from an upper-middle-class background, I fall comfortably within one of the movement's prime demographics. But critical engagement with movement discourse demonstrates clear and persistent inequalities. First, the seeming gender-neutrality of abstinence discourse is illusory. While the rhetoric of the movement calls for equal sexual restraint on the part of men and women, far more weight is placed on women's abstinence. Purity and modesty continue to be gendered female, and abstinence advocates re-inscribe—implicitly or explicitly—natural differences between men's

and women's sexual selves in which women seek emotional, romantic connection and men seek physical, sexual connection. At the college level, in particular, abstinence advocates seem to recommend that participants retreat from this double standard rather than work to eradicate it.

Additionally, while abstinence is supposedly an option for people across racial and class lines, communities—and individuals—have different stakes in the moral project. While abstinence may re-inscribe purity as a form of racial and class hierarchy among the historically privileged, the historically disenfranchised may use it to claim a respectability that has been previously denied to them, and its benefits may not be recognized as easily. As Mullaney writes, “the decision to not-do depends on a certain degree of privilege, power, and access to resources in order for it to have any sort of meaning” (2005: 172). How “free” the choice of abstinence is and the ease with which its benefits are realized vary along raced and classed lines.

Abstinence is a limited and limiting strategy for navigating the complex realm of sex and love. The paralysis I felt upon reading the world around me in terms of the narrative of the abstinence movement was not a particularly helpful reaction, and pledging abstinence until marriage would not eliminate my inevitable uncertainties about love, sex, and selfhood. It would only postpone them, and on the condition that I subscribe to a particular vision of my future.

Premarital abstinence is a temporary solution that supposedly leads inevitably to heterosexual marriage. As such, the entire abstinence paradigm is based in compulsory heterosexuality. Movement discourse consistently erases queer people, whose existence would undermine the universal applicability of a singular solution

that is based in traditional gender roles and heterosexual marriage. For queer and straight people alike, abstinence discourse denies the possibility of finding fulfillment in single lives or unmarried relationships, as well as the reality of unhappy marriages.

In addition to these inequalities and erasures, movement advocates assume and perpetuate a restricted conception of personhood. Movement discourse revolves around the idea of a finite self that can only be depleted and hurt by premarital sex and impermanent relationships, leaving out the expressive potential of experimentation in intimacy. The “guess and check journey” that Rachel chooses to circumvent is what I would call “life,” and there is no easy way around it. The personal and interpersonal complexities that accompany love and sex are not solely negative; they are also sites of learning and growth. Impermanent intimacy can be positive, and painful experiences do not necessarily leave permanent damage. Not only does abstinence discourse make false guarantees that participants can avoid heartache and loss, it limits possibilities and opportunities for personal experience and development through interpersonal intimacy.

The movement also fails to adequately address erotic desire. It reduces young people’s investment in relationships and sex to peer pressure, reputation, and self-esteem, ignoring our experiences of desire and pleasure, love and affection. Abstinence discourse constructs youthful desire as misguided and immature; unless sufficiently controlled, it is sure to do more harm than good. It seems both difficult and contradictory to regard one’s own desire as immoral one day and sanctioned and appropriate the next. Despite the movement’s best efforts to emphasize the beauty and perfection of sex within marriage, defining premarital sex so negatively runs the

risk of making marital sex also seem frightening and wrong. Abstinence rhetoric relies on the metaphor of virginity as a gift, as compared to virginity as a stigma. The movement ignores the possibility of understanding virginity and virginity loss as a *process* of sexual experience (Carpenter 2005). In doing so, it leaves no room for individuals' varying desires and needs, for negotiation, communication, and decision-making.

I do not believe that sexual abstinence itself is necessarily a problem. There are multiple reasons why individuals—not just young people, but all people—may choose abstinence for any amount of time, and it should always be an available and acceptable option. Rather, the problem, in my view, is that abstinence is framed as the sole morally, socially, psychologically, and biologically sound choice. By constructing abstinence as something one pledges to uphold until marriage, movement discourse closes this decision off to any re-evaluation and negotiation that might accompany evolving personal and interpersonal circumstances. In this framework, a change of mind can never be anything but a moral failure.

The abstinence movement paints a daunting picture of mainstream sexual culture, but this picture is incomplete. Abstinence imperfectly addresses very real problems, and a critical perspective on the movement allows us to consider how these issues could be resolved differently. The movement does seem to offer a solution to young people who might feel otherwise pressured to have sex. Wendy Shalit (1999), in particular, is critical of the stigma of abstinence, wherein it is assumed that a young woman would abstain only because she is “not ready,” has “hang ups,” or is “not comfortable with her body.” Shalit has a point that abstaining from sex is often

unfairly marked as immature, a reaction to pressures rather than an agentic decision. But such a bias against abstinence is not solved by unilaterally valorizing it and demonizing sex.

Movement leaders and participants celebrate abstinence as a guarantee of a moral, healthy, and happy life, as protection from guilt, dissatisfaction, heartache, STIs, and even rape. But premarital abstinence and marriage cannot truly assure these things any more than premarital sex can be guaranteed to leave a person miserable and unhealthy. The abstinence movement prescribes limited ways of being and becoming a sexual person, closing participants off to opportunities for individual and interpersonal negotiation, experimentation, learning, and growth.

As persuasive as the narrative can be, the story the movement tells is not all-inclusive. Young people—myself included—have far more nuanced desires, experiences, and potential than fit into the paradigms of the hookup culture or abstinence until marriage. We need to open up more possibilities for a sexual culture that nurtures early romantic and sexual experiences—one that does not rely on essentialized and limiting gendered, raced, classed, and heterosexist sexual scripts—and we must relocate abstinence as one choice among many. We must acknowledge that the complexity of sex and love cannot be resolved with a temporary opt-out policy that does not give people the tools they need to navigate sexuality and interpersonal intimacy when they decide to opt in. Adolescents and young adults—and the adults we will grow into—would all benefit from a reworking of sexual culture that takes desire seriously and holds personal and interpersonal negotiation to be integral to the continual making of the sexual and social self.

Appendix

I contacted several student leaders of campus-based abstinence clubs with email addresses I attained from each club's website. In August 2008, I communicated by email with Jonathan, Brandon, and Rachel, and I spoke by phone with Bill and Andrea. The following are the main questions I asked each of them:

1. What do you think of sexual attitudes and norms in society and at college?
2. Has the sexual climate in American society changed recently? How about on college campuses? How so? Why?
3. What is your opinion of colleges' promoting safer sex, such as giving away free condoms, etc?
4. Do you regard abstinence as a moral issue, a health issue, a religious issue, etc?
5. When and why did your club start?
6. Did you seek out your club, or did it reach out to you?
7. Who are most of your members (in terms of gender, race, class, religion, etc.)?
8. How many members generally attend meetings and events?
9. What activities does your club facilitate?
10. Does your club promote abstinence or provide support for those who have already chosen it?
11. Why do you think clubs like yours have been founded recently?
12. What have you gained from being a part of your club?
13. What has been the general reaction by the rest of campus?
14. What kind of sex education did you have in high school?
15. What kind of sex education should be provided in high school?
16. What do you think of the media portrayal of abstinence?
17. Do you think abstinence ideology has changed recently, or is it just getting more attention?
18. Do you consider the abstinence movement to be countercultural?
19. What is the importance of marriage when it comes to sex?

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