

## Gender, Bodies, and American Christian Nationalism in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*

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### Abstract

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) imagines a world in which women develop the ability to deliver powerful electric shocks, reversing gender relations and leading to the establishment of global matriarchy enforced by violence. While the existing scholarship by José M. Yebra and Alyson Miller focuses on the figure of Mother Eve as a critique of global patriarchal religion as well as the relationship between religious and state power in Bessapara, I attend to the often-neglected figure of Margot, a rising American politician. In this paper, I examine the rhetoric surrounding Margot, arguing that Alderman uses Margot to satirize contemporary white evangelical Christianity and its accompanying right-wing political agendas. I explore the historic connections between abstinence-only sex education, patriarchy, and nationalism, analyze the novel's parody of American political rhetoric, compare the depiction of Margot's queer-coded daughter Jocelyn to gay conversion therapy, and examine the novel's depiction of both sexual and military violence. Ultimately, I argue that *The Power's* depiction of a sexually violent, nationalistic, and ultimately apocalyptic American matriarchy is in fact a representation of American evangelicalism that has "changed Her garment merely" (127).

### Introduction: "Playing with a Nuclear Bomb"

In her account of a visit to a youth rally organized by Silver Ring Thing, a USA-based sexual purity organization, Sara Moslener relates the lyrics of an original song performed for the mostly-teen audience: "The world says use a condom/ If we told you you'd be fine, we'd be lying to your face/It's like playing with a nuclear bomb/ You could wipe out the whole human race" ("Nuclear" 266). The song, Moslener notes, while meant to be humorous and hyperbolic, is part of a larger rhetorical trend within the American white evangelical Christian sexual purity movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: a trend in which teenagers' individual commitment to sexual abstinence, heteronormativity, and women's submission is directly linked to national power and military success. "The moral absolutism of the purity movement," she explains, "cannot be conveyed without the construction of a moral economy that works alongside the larger cosmic battle between good and evil" (*Virgin* 262). In the rhetoric of Silver Ring Thing and other similar organizations, teenagers are actors in a battle for American sovereignty and national cohesion: for the nation to be pure and strong, they must be pure and strong as well. Conversely, if teenagers choose to have premarital sex, use birth control, or question traditional gender roles, they threaten to destroy the nation and hasten Satan's triumph in the imminent apocalypse. While such connections between military nationalism, Christianity, and adolescent sexuality may seem laughable or limited to fringe groups, the influence of purity rhetoric, abstinence-only sex education, and nationalism is prevalent in twenty-first century American discourse and legislation. As Heather Hendershot explains, evangelical Christian abstinence campaigns of the early 1990s found purchase in federal and state legislation, leading to funding for abstinence-only sexual education programs in public schools that continued through the Bush, Obama, and Trump eras (Fox et al. 497).<sup>1</sup> "Chastity persists as a *moral* movement in much of the media addressed to evangelicals," she explains, "but outside of that community evangelical politicians have transformed chastity into a *health* movement under the banner of 'abstinence.' Evangelicals have succeeded in bringing abstinence into the public sphere, in part at least, by obscuring the evangelical roots of their anti-sex (and anti-safe-sex)

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<sup>1</sup> Funding for abstinence-only sex education was significantly reduced during Obama's presidency, but not eliminated; Donald Trump's administration, predictably, reduced funding for comprehensive sex education and increased the funding for abstinence-only sex education once again.

movement" (90).<sup>2</sup> By disguising moral judgments about gender and sexuality as public health policy, evangelical purity advocates were able to embed their teachings about the relationship between gender, sex, and nation within mainstream political and educational rhetoric.

Silver Ring Thing's equivocation of pre-marital sex using a condom and widespread nuclear destruction not only offers a window into the rhetoric of the evangelical sexual purity movement and its wide-ranging political effects; it also provides useful context for Naomi Alderman's 2016 feminist dystopia, *The Power*. In this paper, I examine the novel's treatment of religious power, gendered violence, sexuality, and nationalism. While the existing scholarship focuses on *The Power's* depiction of the prophetic Mother Eve and her founding of a global matriarchal religion, I argue that *The Power* also functions as a specific critique of white American evangelicalism and its rhetorics of patriarchal dominance, sexual purity, and national power. Through an examination of the rhetoric used by the novel's American politician Margot, a comparison of the queer figure of Jocelyn to gay conversion therapy rhetoric, and an examination of the novel's depiction of both sexual and military violence, I argue that *The Power's* depiction of a sexually violent, nationalistic, and ultimately apocalyptic American matriarchy is one of an American evangelicalism that has "changed Her garment merely" (127).

### **American Evangelicals, Gender, and Sex**

Before commencing my argument in earnest, I would like to provide some background for my deployment of the term "evangelical" and my accompanying theoretical framework. Contemporary American evangelical Christians do not adhere to one creed, share one common theological understanding, or belong to one denomination. Indeed, self-identified evangelicals often disagree upon who belongs within this category. The most commonly agreed upon definition of "evangelical" is likely the one put forward by historian David Bebbington in 1989, in which he identifies evangelicals as Christians who share four main qualities: biblicism (a high regard for the Bible), crucicentrism (a focus on Jesus' crucifixion and its saving effects), conversionism (a believe that humans need to be converted

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<sup>2</sup> I do not discuss the evangelical politics of abortion in this essay, but it is worth noting that abstinence-only sex education is pushed as one part of a platform that claims to be invested in reducing abortion; this is not supported by the evidence (Santinelli et al. 273). As Randall Balmer has elucidated, evangelicals historically did not oppose abortion, but seized on it as a useful political issue several years after *Roe v. Wade* passed when they realized that their pro-segregation politics were becoming unviable.

to Christianity), and activism (the belief that faith should influence one's public life) (Bebbington 4).<sup>3</sup> That being said, historians and commentators have come to specifically understand American white evangelicals from the 1970s through the present day as being a group united as much by their similar cultural touchstones and political affiliations as by their theological similarities. Historian Kristen Kobes Du Mez argues throughout *Jesus and John Wayne* (2020), her study of evangelical masculinity and nationalism, that today evangelicals self-identify primarily along political lines: "Many Americans who now identify as evangelicals," she writes, "are identifying with this operational theology—one that is Republican in its politics and traditionalist in its values" (7). Furthermore, I want to emphasize the *whiteness* of the evangelical movement I am examining—while there are self-identified evangelicals within every major ethnic group in the United States, the evangelical rhetoric I analyze in this paper originates with white leaders and organizations, and implicitly supports the project of white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> As Kobes Du Mez notes, it is significant that 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016. She argues that the white evangelical embrace of Trump was the "culmination of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad" (3). This ideology is specifically invested in the protection of white, heterosexual womanhood by white men, and the maintenance of the United States as a white supremacist, patriarchal Christian military power.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As Kristen Kobes Du Mez points out, this definition is complicated by the fact that many people who claim the term evangelical hold views traditionally defined as heresy, and many people who do hold these four distinctives do not identify as evangelicals. In one study, for example, just 25 percent of Black Christians who subscribe to all four "evangelical distinctives" self-identify as evangelical (6).

<sup>4</sup> While this paper does not expound upon the novel's treatment of race, Alyson Miller and Abigail Nussbaum have both rightly criticizing *The Power* for overgeneralizing experiences of gendered oppression while overlooking the axis of racial oppression. This is especially curious because two of its characters are non-white: Tunde is Nigerian, and Allie is biracial, but their status as people of color is never relevant to their storylines (save for some racialized dislike of Allie by her stepparents at the beginning of the novel).

<sup>5</sup> As Moslener examines in her history of American purity campaigns, contemporary purity campaigns and abstinence-only sex education are the descendants of eugenicist propaganda and, even earlier, 19<sup>th</sup> century attempts to prevent white women from having sex with Black men. For a thorough genealogy of purity culture, see Moslener's excellent *Virgin Nation* (2015). For more on the white supremacy of the Trump campaign and presidency, see Jean Guerrero's *Hatemonger: Stephen Miller, Donald Trump, and the White Nationalist Agenda* (2020).

With this understanding in mind of evangelical ideology and rhetoric as primarily political and cultural in nature, I focus on the following two central characteristics of American evangelicalism in this paper: heteronormative, complementarian understandings of gender and sexuality, and a commitment to maintaining national power. Complementarian theology is a theological and cultural mindset that asserts that God created men and women to occupy distinct, fixed, and separate roles: men are called to lead, protect, and be breadwinners, and women are called to submit, nurture, and be homemakers.<sup>6</sup> While proponents of complementarian theology frame it as “separate but equal,” critics argue that complementarianism perpetuates white patriarchal power and makes no space for women’s empowerment or LGBTQ+ identities. Kobes Du Mez argues that complementarian theology evolved as a direct reaction to the feminist and gay rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s: “the virulence with which conservative Christians opposed gay rights,” she writes, “was rooted in the cultural and political significance they placed on the reassertion of distinct gender roles during those decades. Same-sex relationships challenged the most basic assumptions of the evangelical worldview” (63). As I note in my introduction, the evangelical commitment to heteronormative, patriarchal gender roles is directly linked to the strength and perpetuation of the American nation state as a Christian military power. “A father’s rule in the home,” Kobes Du Mez explains, “is inextricably linked to heroic leadership on the national stage, and the fate of the nation hinges on both” (4). Much as in the Silver Ring Thing rhetoric cited above, in this framing the maintenance of strong and distinct gender roles and sexual norms is directly related to national power. Because of this investment in power and control, evangelical rhetoric frequently employs threats of violence, chaos, suffering, and even death to reinforce gender and sexuality norms. As Jason Bivins explains in *Religion of Fear* (2008), evangelical messaging provides its audience with a clear picture of a world clearly divided between good and evil, in which evangelical Christians—their teachings, their convictions, and their choices—stand

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<sup>6</sup> The most prominent advocate for complementarian theology is probably the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, an evangelical parachurch organization created in 1987 by several evangelical leaders, including Wayne Grudem and John Piper, aiming to “set forth the teachings of the Bible about the complementary differences between men and women, created equally in the image of God, because these teachings are essential for obedience to Scripture and for the health of the family and the church” (“Mission”). The Council has released two notable statements: the Danvers Statement, in 1989, which opposes women’s ordination and gender-neutral Bible translations, and the Nashville Statement, in 2017, which condemns gay and trans identities as incompatible with Christianity and the Bible.

alone and steady in the face of chaos. This messaging infuses political and social issues with mythic importance: “creators provide for audiences and readers an interpretive template that posits demonological causes for political decline, and they situate readers in a historical framework and define for audiences a coherent, unchanging place therein” (Bivins 9). Questions about sexual orientation, gendered bathroom use, female clergy, and other shifts in understandings of gender and sexuality have cosmic stakes: culture warriors understand themselves as battling for the soul and survival of the nation. As I demonstrate in the following analysis, *The Power* both reflects this relationship between heteronormativity and national power and draws attention to it by inverting it through its depiction of a violent, matriarchal United States.

### ***The Power* and Religion**

*The Power* provides readers with a vision of a society in which women suddenly discover they possess organs that allow them, much like electric eels, to deliver powerful electric shocks to attackers or victims. In the years following this discovery, the balance of power around the world gradually shifts, as women first seek revenge for misogynistic violence, then come to dominate politics, media, religion, the military, and everyday life, before eventually bringing about nuclear war and apocalypse. Alderman traces these developments mainly through the eyes of four characters: Tunde, a Nigerian photojournalist and the novel's only male protagonist; Roxy, the powerful and cynical daughter of a British crime boss; Margot, a mid-level American politician, and Allie, an abused foster child who becomes the prophet and face of a new, matriarchal religion based around “Mother Eve.” The Mother Eve religion eventually spreads worldwide, reinterpreting diverse religious texts to centralize female power, and aids in propping up Bessapara, a matriarchal military state in former Moldova. Further complicating the text is a frame narrative, set in a matriarchal mirror of our contemporary publishing world, in which the young male author Neil Adam Armon (an anagram of “Naomi Alderman”) writes to his mentor, an arrogant female author named Naomi, about his new speculative historical novel, also entitled *The Power*. Upon its publication, Alderman's novel generated a great deal of buzz and critical acclaim, in no small part because it resulted from a mentorship program that paired Alderman with legendary science fiction author Margaret Atwood. Due to this mentorship as well as thematic links between the works, critics have connected *The Power* to Atwood's own gendered dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). NPR's Lynn Neary, for example, writes that “it seems fitting that 2017 has been bookended by two

novels about women and power”: *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which reached best-seller lists following the novel’s successful Hulu adaptation and the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, and *The Power*, which had just won the Bailey Women’s Prize for Fiction and appeared on several year-end best-of lists.<sup>7</sup> Despite critics making connections between the themes of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Power*, few have connected the novels’ depictions of American Christianity. Extremist Christianity is, of course, at the heart of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as numerous critics have explored in depth.<sup>8</sup> What little scholarship exists concerning *The Power*, however, has mostly overlooked the heritage of specifically American Christianity that backgrounds the novel. José M. Yebra, in his study of violence and dystopia in *The Power*, notes that “the novel is deeply embedded in tradition, particularly Judaeo-Christianity and its palimpsestic substrate, namely nature and biology” (74). He focuses mainly on the connection between Mother Eve teachings and violence; when he critiques religious radicalism in the novel, however, he connects it mainly to Islamic terrorism (79). Alyson Miller, meanwhile, refers in passing to the novel’s depiction of “abstinence culture,” but focuses most of her study on the depiction of sexual violence and its relationship to power (409). Neither of these critics dwell on the figures of Margot and Jocelyn, instead locating most of their examination of religion in the text on the central religious figure of Mother Eve. As such, I suggest, my examination of evangelical purity rhetoric and gendered nationalism within *The Power* is a novel and meaningful intervention.

While it is tempting to read *The Power* as a vision of matriarchy or a feminist dystopia, I read the novel primarily as satire of current patriarchal power—including contemporary American evangelicalism. As Lucy Atkins argues, Alderman uses textual codes to signal parody, framing her novel using a “self-referential play on notions of fact and fiction, authorship, genre and gender” (n.p.). By reading the novel as satire, the reader is encouraged not only to imagine a strange and eventually horrific alternate society, but rather to also recognize the parallels between the novel’s society and ours. The novel’s matriarchy, Miller argues, functions “in the narrative [...] not to suggest a new way of being, but rather to underline an existing dynamic in

<sup>7</sup> While *The Power* was published in the UK in 2016, it was released in the United States in 2017, where it received widespread acclaim and press coverage.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Kristy Tenbus’s “Palimpsestuous Voices: Institutionalized Religion and the Subjugation of Women in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”; Christabelle Sethna’s “‘Not an instruction manual’: Environmental degradation, racial erasure, and the politics of abortion in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”; and Ray Horton’s “Is There a Context for Gilead? Reading *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Lila* under the Christian Right.”

which self and other perpetually collide” (407). She quotes NPR’s Michael Schaub: “What a man reads as a horrifying dystopia, a woman reads as a fairly accurate state of the world as it is today” (407). While I corroborate Miller’s assertion that the novel functions as a satire, I believe that in focusing her attention on the figure of Mother Eve/Allie, and worldwide patriarchy more broadly, she overlooks the specificity of Alderman’s parody of American evangelical rhetoric.

### **Margot Cleary and the Politics of Evangelicalism**

A close examination of the figures of Margot and Jocelyn Cleary demonstrates how Alderman specifically satirizes contemporary evangelical Christianity and its ties between gender, sexuality, and nationalism. As a mid-level American politician in the rapidly changing United States of *The Power*, Margot Cleary provides a window into American politics before, during, and after the shift between patriarchy and matriarchy. In the turmoil that follows women’s sudden acquisition of superior physical power, Margot reports fear and outrage from religious leaders: “Preachers and televangelists grab the news and squeeze it, finding in the sticky entrails the unmistakable signs of the impending end of days” (22). In one of her chapters, Allie corroborates this reaction, noting that “in those days, in the South, there were many preachers who explained it: this is a punishment for sin, this is Satan walking among us, this is the sign of the end of days” (89). This reaction reflects the logic of an evangelical worldview as outlined above by Bivins, in which disruptions to existing gender dynamics are understood as apocalyptic and threatening to national security.<sup>9</sup> We see a similar connection, for example, in the famously controversial remarks of American evangelical leader Jerry Falwell Sr. following 9/11.<sup>10</sup> In an appearance on fellow evangelical leader Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club*, Falwell declared, “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians [...] I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped this happen’” (“Falwell”). Falwell, much like the televangelists in Alderman’s novel, draws a direct line between national disaster and deviance from heteronormativity, suggesting a cyclical cause-and-effect relationship between gender and

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<sup>9</sup> Though to be fair, gender norms notwithstanding, any human developing powers similar to those of an electric eel or a member of the X-Men would no doubt be (pardon the pun) shocking.

<sup>10</sup> Falwell Jr. is also the founder of the evangelical Liberty University, one of the largest Christian universities in the world. His son and its current president, Jerry Falwell Jr., is famously a close friend and political ally of Donald Trump, in whom he says “evangelicals have found their dream president” (Mazza).



sexual deviance and attacks on the state. In *The Power*, religious fear of the shift in gendered power is matched by political anxiety. However, much as in the rhetoric surrounding purity culture and abstinence-only sex education in the United States today, when reactions towards women's electroshock powers appear in the political realm in the novel, politicians initially use more veiled language to convey their messages.

In her depiction of American political reactions to the emergence of "the power,"<sup>11</sup> Alderman explicitly invokes the language of evangelical sexual purity. Throughout the novel, women's ability to electroshock is sexualized: Tunde gets aroused at the idea of being shocked by a crush, Roxy has boys begging her to shock them during sex, and Margot compares her first experience using the power to losing her virginity: "It feels as natural as anything she's ever done, as known and understood as the first time she had sex, as her body saying, Hey, I got this" (70). Correspondingly, the fictional government direction about how to regulate the power parody existing American conservative government instruction regarding sexuality:

The official line for now from the Mayor's office, handed out on photocopied sheets to schools across the major metropolitan area is: abstinence. Just don't do it. It'll pass. We keep the girls separate from the boys. There'll be an injection within a year or two to stop this thing happening and then we'll all go back to normal. It's as upsetting for the girls to use it as it is for their victims. (70)

There are two aspects of this passage that I want to highlight. The first, and most obvious, is its echo of evangelical purity language: "abstinence. Just don't do it." Girls' use of the power is seen as abnormal and threatening to their male peers and to society as a whole, reflecting purity rhetoric such as that seen in the introduction to this paper. As Moslener writes:

[...] purity culture demonstrates how sexual immorality poses a legitimate threat to the individual and to the collective well-being of the American citizenry. In doing so, evangelical purity culture marks adolescent sexual purity as a venue rife with opportunities for personal transformation, national revitalization, and quite possibly, the salvation of American civilization. (*Virgin* 15)

As Moselener's analysis suggests, we can find a second aspect of purity rhetoric in the above passage from *The Power*: the argument that sex is damaging not only to others and to the nation but also to the self. The government argues that using the power is "as upsetting for the girls to use as it is for their victims" (70). By framing girls' use of the power as mutually

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<sup>11</sup> Terms are bound to get confusing; when I refer to "*The Power*" I'm discussing the novel; when I refer to "power" I'm speaking of the general theorization of relations of violence, control, and influence; when I refer to "*the power*" in the context of the novel I'm referring to women's electroshock abilities.

damaging, the government assumes that there cannot be consenting, pleasurable uses of the power (an assumption that we see refuted throughout the novel). Furthermore, this passage also works to cast teenage girls as passive and equally victimized, suggesting an effort to maintain a status quo in which boys are naturally active and girls are naturally passive. This rhetoric surrounding girls' power shifts in correspondence with changes in the structure of society; later on in the novel, rhetoric around teen girls' use of the power more closely reflects evangelical descriptions of male sexuality.

As women become the dominant gender in *The Power*, Alderman uses Margot to satirize evangelical attitudes towards both male power and male sexuality. One of the first hints of this shift occurs when Margot finds out that her daughter Jocelyn has participated in shocking and seriously injuring a male classmate. "There were...three other girls?" Margot supplies in response to her daughter's ashamed silence. "I know they started it. That boy should never have been near you. They've been checked out at John Muir. You just gave the kid a scare" (24). In this scene, Margot employs minimizing techniques to absolve Jocelyn of responsibility for violence: she blames her peers for their bad influence, as well as victim-blaming the boy for putting himself in the situation where he got hurt. In doing so, she mirrors patriarchal constructions of masculine power and coy feminine weakness—constructions that exist within American society as a whole but are especially egregious within evangelical purity rhetoric. As Hendershot explains in her analysis of conservative evangelical culture, evangelical narratives of power and sexuality tend to frame teenage girls simultaneously as sexless beings desperate for affection and as dangerous temptresses whose bodies invite attack; boys, meanwhile, are seen as being completely at the mercy of their sex drives. Hendershot writes:

By constructing a teen body utterly lacking self-control, a body that can only be controlled or cured by a spiritual commitment to chastity, evangelical books, magazines, and videos may not only be dangerous to teen self-image but also may encourage boys to be sexually violent and girls to see submission to sexual violence as natural. Boys and girls who are repeatedly told that at a certain point they are no longer in control may as a result feel less in control, and it may actually be more difficult to stop sexual activity if one conceives of one's body as a runaway train. (9)

As Hendershot notes, a construction of the body as dangerous and difficult to control absolves boys of moral responsibility for their actions and furthers victim blaming for girls. This logic parallels the logic of the above passage, in which Margot constructs Jocelyn as blameless within the interaction with the injured boy. Lest the connection between violence and teenage sexuality

seem dubious here, I turn to Margot's thoughts a few sentences later, in which she considers Jocelyn's inability to talk to her mother about her actions and feelings: "Margot remembers trying to talk to her own mother about boys or the stuff that happened at parties. About how far was *too far*, where a boy's hand should stop. She remembers the absolute impossibility of those conversations" (25). Here, Margot explicitly links Jocelyn's use of the power to her own adolescent experience—not only of sexuality, but also of sexual threat. The irony, however, is of course that now her daughter is in the position of the aggressor, not the victim.

This societal shift towards excusing powerful women for their aggression and framing men as in need of protection becomes especially clear in the novel's depiction of Margot's political trajectory. Margot begins her rise to power by advocating for training camps in which teen girls teach each other to use the power effectively. She frames this project as a civic one, in which teenagers will learn to harness and control abilities that would otherwise be incredibly dangerous. In a television appearance promoting the program, she quotes a Biblical passage: "In times like these, we should probably remember what the Bible says: 'the highest among us aren't always the wisest, and the older generation isn't always the best to judge what's right.'" She smiles. Quoting the Bible—a winning strategy" (98).<sup>12</sup> Two things are notable about this passage. The first is the most obvious: Margot cynically deploys the Bible as a politically strategic intertext, indicating the popularity of Biblical messaging with American voters and suggesting that politicians often use Biblical intertext for political gain without necessarily believing the Bible's messages. Secondly, Margot's choice of verse reflects the shifting public attitudes regarding gender. She frames herself simultaneously as an underdog—not "the highest among us," as well as a representative of youth and innovation—not part of "the older generation." She adds to this impression by having Jocelyn join her and "testify" to the damage of her encounter with the boy she hurt. "It was scary," Jocelyn says. "I hadn't learned how to control it. I was worried I could have really hurt him. I wished...I wished someone had shown me how to use it properly. How to control it" (97). By having Jocelyn promote her agenda, Margot uses a rhetorical tactic that, while common, is especially pervasive in abstinence-

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<sup>12</sup> Margot is likely paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 1:27-29—"But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (NIV). This verse is famously used—far more earnestly—in the climax of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*.

only messaging: the appeal to the remorseful young person. In this tactic, popularized by anti-drug PSAs and afterschool specials, a teenager recounts how they lacked the knowledge and control to self-regulate, made a terrible mistake, and wish that their peers could learn from them to prevent being hurt. As Caroline Blyth explains, cautionary tales framed as testimony from peers are popular evidence for writers and activists advocating for sexual purity: teens' "[...] virginity is fetishized, and its 'loss' is mourned as a source of their remorse, unhappiness, and sin" (19). Jocelyn's statement follows the same blueprint as these cautionary tales: she used the power (her sexuality) instead of knowing how to control it, she is remorseful and hurt, and she wishes that she had someone to teach her how to control the power (her sexuality).

As Margot's political rise demonstrates, however, abstinence rhetoric and evangelical gender roles are often a smokescreen for the promotion of gendered power and national security. The turning point in Margot's career comes while she is running for governor, in a televised debate with her rival and former boss, Daniel. Daniel's team pursues traditionally gendered attacks, accusing her of being cold and hard and a neglectful mother and failed wife, and they appear to be working until Margot gets angry and shocks Daniel slightly. While voters claim, in polls, to disapprove of Margot's use of violence, she wins in a landslide:

It turns out the voters lied. Just like the accusations they always throw out at hard-working public servants, the goddamned electorate turned out to be goddamned liars themselves. They said they respected hard work, commitment, and moral courage. They said that the candidate's opponent had lost their vote the moment she gave up on reasoned discourse and calm authority. But when they went into the voting booths in their hundreds, and thousands, and tens of thousands, they'd thought, You know what, though, she's strong. She'd show them. (187)

Through the voice of Daniel's furious campaign manager, Alderman contrasts voters' attested values—hard work, commitment, and moral courage—with their actual allegiance: strength, as seen through “righteous,” retaliatory violence. Though *The Power* was published in Britain a week before the 2016 American election, Margot's election bears a striking similarity to the surprising triumph of Donald Trump, who rode to power supported by a base of white evangelicals. While media outlets covering Trump's campaign and election into office reeled in an attempt to understand how so many professed Christians would vote for a candidate who seemingly betrayed their moral values, other critics argued that Trump represented a form of militant masculinity and brash thirst for power that reassured evangelical voters. As Adam Serwer famously argued in a piece for *The*

*Atlantic*, entitled “The Cruelty Is the Point,” “Trump’s only true skill is the con; his only fundamental belief is that the United States is the birthright of straight, white, Christian men, and his only real authentic pleasure is in cruelty” (n. p.). Kobes Du Mez, meanwhile, points to evangelical support of Ronald Reagan—another Hollywood figure who promised to protect American interests and take hardline stances against crime and communism—over devoted Baptist Jimmy Carter as a precedent for this seeming hypocrisy: a precedent that Alderman implicitly draws on with Margot’s election. Margot’s election marks a turning point for gendered power in the novel, as well as offering a sharp critique of contemporary evangelical politics: voters and politicians alike, Alderman suggests, may claim moral superiority, but their real alliance is with power, violence, and defiant aggression.

### **Conversion Therapy, Homophobia, and the Queerness of Jocelyn**

My analysis of Margot as a critique of evangelical nationalism and purity rhetoric is complicated and deepened by the queer coding of her daughter, Jocelyn. Jocelyn is positioned throughout the novel as an unruly figure not only for her inability to control her power, but also for its frequent inexplicable absence. After her first television appearance, before the complete shift in global gender dynamics, Jocelyn receives hate mail linking her unruliness to an inability to conform to gender roles: “You want to know *why*?” her critic writes. “You want to know if anyone else is having trouble, too? You don’t know the half of it, sister. This rabbit hole goes all the way down. Your gender-bending confusion is just the start of it. We need to put men and women back where they belong” (90). The letter writer explicitly links Jocelyn’s struggles with her body and place in society as linked to her inability to conform to existing gender roles, describing her as “gender-bending.” The use of this term is especially fascinating, since at this point Jocelyn does not dress or act in any gender nonconforming way, nor have men traditionally had electroshock powers. Rather, the letter writer is threatened by Jocelyn’s power as a woman and believes that a strict adherence to traditional roles will rehabilitate the status quo. Notably, however, even as women are widely embraced as the more powerful gender, Jocelyn remains coded as queer. She begins secretly dating Ryan, a boy she met online who has a secret, low-functioning skein—the in-universe term for the bundle of nerves located on women’s collarbones that allows them to

electroshock people—due to a “chromosomal irregularity.”<sup>13</sup> Jocelyn’s attraction to Ryan is described as simultaneously physical and emotional: she enjoys talking to someone who also doesn’t have much consistent power in their skein, but also, “Jos quite likes girls. She quite likes boys who are a bit like girls” (171). The novel does not directly describe Jocelyn’s sexual orientation or gender identity other than with this statement: it does not name her as queer, bisexual, or some other identity, nor does Jocelyn unpack the physical essentialism of her comparison of Ryan to a woman because of their shared skein. This is, arguably, due to Alderman’s framing of gender as binary and physically-determined throughout *The Power*. As Constance Grady critiques, “at no point does she look at what it would mean for the trans community. It’s as though Alderman cannot imagine critiquing our current patriarchal system of gender without erasing trans people from the world, which is one of the fundamental failures of this novel” (n. p.). Nevertheless, if one continues to read the novel partially as a satire of evangelical Christianity, then Jocelyn’s queerness—and Margot’s treatment of her—are especially pointed.

I argue that *The Power*’s connection between Jocelyn’s erratic supply of electricity and her queerness serves to satirize evangelical narratives of homosexuality, gender, and national power. Miller has criticized the depiction of Jocelyn in the novel, arguing that:

Given that Jos is one of the few characters signified as queer, there is, arguably, a problematic imbrication of her dysfunctional skein and an ‘othered’ sexual identity. Such a pairing evokes a rhetoric of biological fault, an error of neurological wiring that might be rectified via the regime of Margot’s NorthStar training camps, a ‘force for good’ designed to train and regulate the use of the power in young girls” (428).

While I believe that Miller is correct in recognizing the novel’s connection between Jos’s sexual identity and apparent biological dysfunction, I assert that she overlooks how *The Power* uses Jocelyn to satirize evangelical rhetoric regarding queerness—especially male “homosexuality.” While there are outliers amongst evangelicals, the vast majority of evangelicals throughout modern history have condemned nonheteronormative gender expressions and sexual orientations as explicitly sinful and incompatible with Christian faith. This condemnation stems in part from an anxiety regarding the unruly queer body: a body that—as evangelical Christian leaders readily

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<sup>13</sup> Despite his “chromosomal irregularity,” Jocelyn (and the narrator) exclusively refer to Ryan as a boy, not as nonbinary, intersex, or transgender. As I discuss further later in this paper, the novel does not feature a serious engagement with trans identities or other forms of gender diversity.

admit—threatens complementarian gender roles and patriarchal masculinity.<sup>14</sup> This sense of threat is demonstrated by the rhetoric and practices put forward by evangelical proponents of so-called gay conversion therapy. Proponents of gay conversion, whether encouraging at-home study and reflection or urging concerned parents to enroll their errant offspring in camps and programs, frame the queer individual as a) fundamentally flawed or deviant, and b) capable of being rehabilitated (Bjork-James 647).<sup>15</sup> This model is framed in explicitly gendered terms: queer individuals experience “same-sex attraction” because of childhood trauma or a failure of their relationship with their parents, and they can be cured through a combination of religious faith and gender conformity. As Kristin Wintermute describes, for example, at Exodus International meetings “workshops focused on embracing traditional masculinity or femininity, as antidotes to being gay. Conference attendees also took part in gender-conforming activities, such as the men playing football and the girls wearing make-up, as conditioning towards becoming what ‘God wants’ you to be” (n.p.). Gender conformity is seen as transformative: the body is pliable, but God’s power of transformation is not enough; it must be augmented by performing heteronormative masculinity and femininity. The focus on adhering to strict gender roles within gay conversion therapy suggests the anxiety at its core: not that the non-conforming individual is sinful, but rather that the unruly individual is a threat to the continuation of patriarchal masculinity and complementarian understandings of gender and sexual orientation. Within this context, then, the connection between Jocelyn’s queerness and her “faulty wiring” that needs to be fixed at the NorthStar training camps should

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<sup>14</sup> This is seen clearly, for example, in the “Nashville Statement” (2017) from the previously introduced Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which argues that individuals cannot simultaneously be Christians and affirm LGBTQ+ identities, and was co-signed by over 150 evangelical leaders. In linked articles, the Nashville Statement affirms “divinely ordained differences between male and female reflect[ing] God’s original creation design” and denies “that sexual attraction for the same sex is part of the natural goodness of God’s original creation” (Bolz-Weber n.p.). In response, progressive Lutheran pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber led her LGBTQ+ affirming congregation, House for All Sinners and Saints, in composing The Denver Statement, which critiqued evangelical connections between holiness, masculinity, and complementarianism, and insisted on the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ Christians and bodies.

<sup>15</sup> Ex-gay ministries including Exodus International and Focus on the Family’s Love Won Out were both popular and profitable in the 1990s and early 2000s, but have faced increasing scrutiny and opposition in recent years. In 2009, the American Psychological Association issued a statement criticizing sexual conversion therapy as both unscientific and damaging, and a growing number of states have passed laws making it illegal for licensed counselors to practice conversion therapy with underage patients (Bjork-James 650).

be read as a reference to evangelical rhetoric's frequent connections between queerness and the health—or frailty—of the nation. As Moslener notes, evangelical connections between queerness and the health of the state date back to the Cold War: “Numerous leaders believed that not only was homosexuality an acceptable practice under the Soviet regime, as were other forms of sexual anarchy, but that American homosexuals were susceptible to blackmail by communist spies” (“Nuclear” 260). Later, evangelical critics identified the AIDS epidemic as signaling a fundamental threat queerness posed both to individual health and to public life.<sup>16</sup> Understood through this framework, then, the “rehabilitation” of the queer figure is not merely a question of personal morality or spirituality, but rather is essential to the endurance of the nation.

With this context in mind, then, I assert that Jocelyn is framed as a biologically deviant figure with a dysfunctional skein in need of rehabilitation not because Alderman sees queerness as a moral error or bodily weakness, but because evangelical rhetoric does. Throughout the novel, both Jocelyn and her critics use language to describe her skein and her relationships that echo the language of gay conversion therapy and queer Christian experience. Shortly after encouraging Jocelyn to break up with her boyfriend Ryan, for example, Margot frames herself as a benevolent figure wanting to help Jocelyn live a whole and correct life:

“I still think we can find some help for you. If we could find someone to help you...well, you'd just be able to like normal boys.” Jos puts her cup down on the table slowly. She says, “Do you really think so?” And Margot says, “I know it, honey. I know it. You can be just like all the other girls. I know we can fix it for you.” (215)

In this passage, Margot explicitly links Jocelyn's own gender conformity (“just like all the other girls”) with her sexual relationships (she'd be able to like “normal boys”). Furthermore, she suggests that Jocelyn's gender conformity can be enforced and that by being “fixed” and learning to be a proper woman, Jocelyn will eradicate both her queerness and her difficulties using the power. Margot's solution for Jocelyn's “problem” is to enroll her in a NorthStar training camp, one of her experimental camps that train women to

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<sup>16</sup> This narrative proved so effective and pervasive that it has endured in evangelical circles even as the AIDS epidemic has diminished in the United States and AIDS is no longer experienced internationally as a primarily “gay disease.” As Bivins examines in his study of evangelical Hell Houses (elaborate immersive theater experiences depicting sinful lifestyles), many narratives attempt to simultaneously depict gay men as sexually promiscuous and dying of AIDS (a 1970s-80s stereotype) while also depicting them as perversely seeking the right to marry in parodic gay weddings (a twenty-first century phenomenon) (154).



use their power—and prepares them to be private mercenaries. If one reads the NorthStar training camps partially as an analogue for gay conversion therapy camps, then Alderman is suggesting that by attempting to eradicate Jocelyn's queerness and teach her to embody gendered power, Margot is also encouraging her daughter to prop up national power and protect the nation-state through violence. This reading is reinforced in the only scene set at one of the camps, in which Jocelyn—still unable to control her power despite training—accidentally shocks a trespasser to death, and then is praised and held up as a hero and an exemplar (236). “It’s great to know that we have young women like you ready to defend the country,” the breathy young anchor tells her on television later that week, reinforcing that when Jocelyn exhibits power and violence she is read as a good woman and protector of national security. Despite her training at the NorthStar camps, however, Jocelyn cannot “fix” her skein—or by extension, her queerness, a situation that leaves her anguished and feeling inadequate. Near the end of the novel, in a private meeting with Mother Eve, Jocelyn once again mirrors the language of evangelical queer experience, begging Mother Eve to fix her. “Please...Please heal me and make me normal,” she begs. “Please ask God to take this burden from me. Please let me be normal” (254). The implication is clear: despite all the training, patriotic bravado, and social encouragement in the world, Jocelyn’s status as a queer figure is unalterable—and despite a shift from a patriarchal religion to a matriarchal one, her political and social worlds still convince her that God wants her to become “normal.”

### **Conclusion: Matriarchal Power, Matriarchal Violence**

By way of conclusion, I turn to two of the violent results of the gendered power and violent nationalism exhibited by Margot—and, by extent, evangelical Christianity. While an extensive analysis of the depiction of sexual violence in *The Power* is beyond the scope of this project, I cannot proceed without noting the pervasive threat and depiction of rape in the novel. Rape is present at the outset in its patriarchal world, practiced systemically against sex workers and personally against the foster child Allie, and it endures in the new matriarchal society, as seen horrifyingly as a weapon of war in later scenes set in Bessapara. Alyson Miller has addressed *The Power*'s depiction of sexual violence deftly, suggesting the novel frames sexual violence as “intrinsic to the exercise of authority” (401). For the purposes of this project, however, I am more interested in how these eruptions of sexual violence are framed as the inevitable outcome of subtler attitudes from figures like Margot. In a diplomatic meeting in Bessapara late in the novel, Margot—now a U. S. Senator—promises to look the other way regarding Bessapara’s

oppression of men and rampant state-sanctioned rape, excusing it as “cultural differences” (249).<sup>17</sup> While Margot does not rape anyone nor ever explicitly condones rape in the course of the novel, she does begin to display casually condescending and sexist attitudes towards attractive men that suggests she now sees them primarily as sexual objects and believes her political and physical power gives her a right to their bodies. Ogling Tunde, she notes that he is “handsome as hell” and wonders “how’s she supposed to take him seriously now, when she’s seen his broad shoulders and narrow waist, and the rolling landscape of obliques and delts, glutes and pecs” in his live reports from tropical locations (245). Later in the scene, Margot uses her power to sleep with an attractive young male intern, with the implication that he owes her sexual favors because she is his political superior (251). Through the figure of Margot, Alderman satirizes the hypocrisy of so-called moral authorities who promote sexual purity while also reinforcing patriarchal power. As Kobes Du Mez notes, while American evangelical leaders have frequently perpetuated an image of the benevolent patriarch who protects white womanhood, children, and the nation, in reality the evangelical they have preached a “vision of Christian masculinity—of patriarchy and submission, sex and power [...] that promised protection for women but left women without defense, one that worshiped power and turned a blind eye to justice” (294).<sup>18</sup> In the figure of Margot, Alderman demonstrates the absurdity of any claim that the superior power of one gender will lead to the protection of other genders rather than their exploitation. Far from being a feminist vision of an empowered woman in politics advocating for justice for the oppressed, Margot duplicates the abuse of power practiced by male church authorities and political figures alike in contemporary American society.

The denouement of *The Power* simultaneously satirizes the end goal of evangelical politics while also critiquing the inevitable destruction caused by untrammelled thirst for power and violence.<sup>19</sup> The novel ends in nuclear war,

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<sup>17</sup> For a disturbing account of how evangelical politicians in the United States often lend support to more extremist gendered projects abroad, see Jeff Sharlet’s *The Family: Power, Politics, and Fundamentalism’s Shadow Elite* (2008).

<sup>18</sup> This was demonstrated vividly in the #ChurchToo movement, in which women who had experienced sexual abuse within the context of Christianity shared their stories in response to the larger #MeToo movement. For more on the #ChurchToo movement see founder Emily Joy’s *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (2021).

<sup>19</sup> As Andrews F. Hermann explains, among more right-wing evangelicals and similarly extreme right-wing politicians, apocalypse is one of the major focuses and goals of

condoned by men's rights activists, exiled Saudi Arabian generals, Mother Eve (now dictator of Bessapara), and Margot alike. Margot, in particular, sees her advocacy for war simultaneously as retribution for her Jocelyn being horribly injured in combat, as a way of finally destroying patriarchy, and as a way of asserting American sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> "My country comes first," she declares. "We need strong leadership" (369). In Margot's advocacy for nuclear war, we see a logical outcome of dogmatic nationalism and the uplifting of any gender as physically superior and entitled to power and control. Margot has served throughout the novel as a parody of evangelical rhetoric and politics; when she self-righteously brings about nuclear war, Alderman suggests the horrifying end game of the evangelical agenda that props up abstinence campaigns and sanctifies patriarchy. While Silver Ring Thing may claim that safe sex is like a nuclear bomb, *The Power's* satirical treatment of American politics, purity culture, and patriarchy suggests that evangelical Christian rhetoric is far more likely to "wipe out the whole human race" (Moslener "Nuclear" 266).

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evangelical Christianity: "Fundamental evangelicals believe that in the coming final battle, America will fight on the side of Israel, and in order to do that it *must* remain a Christian nation. America *must* remain pure. Purity is imperative: individually, sexually, and nationally (416).

<sup>20</sup> Jocelyn, now a soldier abroad in a war zone, is nearly fatally electrocuted during an altercation in which her skein fails to provide her with ample power.

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