“Human Love in the Divine Plan”: Sexual Agency among All-Girls Catholic School Graduates

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Me in my school uniform, circa 2016.
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Abstract

Using both autoethnography and in-depth interviews, this thesis explores the experiences and reflections of one all-girls Catholic school’s graduates on their school’s sexual education. Given limited abstinence-only sexual education and surveillant school policies, where do Catholic school students learn about sex and how do they express sexual agency? First, this thesis examines the source of sexual information from the school in the form of the curriculum, the policies, and the general culture. The sexual education curriculum at Saint Margaret’s, a small all-girls Catholic school in Hawaii, was largely based on Pope John Paul II’s interpretation of the Bible in his lecture series, “Human Love in the Divine Plan.” His catechesis was developed into a national morality-based sexual education course, called *Theology of the Body for Teens*, which includes strict sexual guidelines for Catholic women. Interviews with Saint Margaret’s graduates reveal that the curriculum’s messaging was ineffective; students noted an unequal gender dynamic of power and responsibility riddled with heteronormative and essentialistic assumptions. Secondly, this thesis poses an unconventional framework of sexual education to explore how students come to understand sex past the confines of the classroom in various ways. School policies – including a policy for pregnant students, the uniform, prom regulations, and the administration’s handling of an outwardly gay couple – became crucial aspects of students’ sexual learning. The administration’s use of surveillance paradoxically compelled students to privately consume sexual content, as well as participate in other forms of small-scale rebellion (e.g., embellishing the uniform, reading erotic fiction, engaging in discreet conversations about sex). Agentive actions that neither explicitly reject Catholic doctrine nor wholly accept it make up what I call implicit resistance. Notably, students’ early sexual experiences became an informal part of their sexual learning and thus, a keystone of their self-curated sexual education. The students’ sexual agency, then – be it in conformity to Catholic doctrine, resistance, or something in between – serves a critical role in their understandings of sex. The study ultimately brings to light all-girls Catholic school graduates’ previously hidden experiences in order to push forward understandings of the ways sexual agency and education are understood together.
Introduction

On Wednesday night, October 16th, 2019 at around 9:15 pm, I walked into the locked closet in my room to find the large box of my old diaries. This box contained 24 of my former diaries, filled with every dirty, embarrassing secret, thought, and experience I could think to write, covering the years of 2008 to 2018. I dug through the box to find the diary with the carved wooden cover. It looked and felt exactly the same as when I originally used it – more than four years earlier. It looked the same but did not read the same. At certain moments, it feels as if I am reading someone else’s diary. Several times, in disbelief, I think, there is no way I actually did that, said that, or thought that! A good portion into my diary, I come across the line, “I thought I wouldn’t like sex at all the first time, but I really liked it…. I was so relieved that it happened, that it didn’t change anything between us, that he still loved me and I still loved him.” In shock, I stop reading for a second to process. Did I really think that if I had sex with my boyfriend, he would stop loving me? It makes me think: Who taught me to think that? Who taught me that having sex would be uncomfortable? Who taught me about sex?

I remember being so dedicated to documenting every single experience and emotion, especially as it pertained to my first romantic relationship and sexual experiences. I wonder about my incentives for writing in such detail and with such commitment. I started to think about the possibility that my journal was an outlet for me to express thoughts I felt I could not express to anyone else in my life. My journal acted as my nonjudgmental confidante. More importantly, my journal may have been the only entity in my life that I felt consistently cared about what I had to say, the only onlooker to bear witness to the most important and private events in my life.
Thus, it may have been the only space with which I felt comfortable sharing my early sexual experiences. Why did I find it so difficult to talk to anyone about sex and sexuality?

Having attended a Catholic school for 13 years, I grew up with a complicated perspective on sex. My school offered a sexual education class, alongside censorship of certain topics to the Catholic church’s liking. The purpose of the class was to teach students about and promote Catholic church-approved sexual etiquette. The class did not cover human anatomy, biology, sexually transmitted infections, or anything related to sexual health. Instead, we carried around flour sack babies for a semester. The idea was to deter students from having premarital sex by showing how burdensome raising a baby would be. Discussions of birth control and sex without pregnancy were off the table, and conversations about abortion were practically nonexistent due to their controversial nature. Yet, the abstinence-only curriculum did not deter students from having sex. Several cases of teenage pregnancy within my school bring up questions surrounding the effectiveness of abstinence-only classes — such as the one I took — and their social impacts on students. Since, human anatomy, considered obscene, was not taught at my school, I learned about these topics a lot later than some of my friends who attended secular schools. Given little to no information about the actual act of sex, how did I make sense of sex? How did the other graduates of my school learn about sex and sexuality? The complicated nature of understanding sex as a graduate of an all-girls Catholic school is the topic of this thesis. Specifically, I am interested in how these women look back at their understandings of sex in the context of the school and how they have come to understand and experience sex once out of the school context, years later.

If one believes that a morality-based education, such as abstinence-only education, constitutes sexual education, then it can be argued that we did receive sexual education. On the
other hand, if one believes that sex education is comprised of anatomy and other secular forms of information (i.e., gender, diversity of sexual orientation, pleasure, consent, and other topics), it can be said that we did not receive comprehensive sexual education.

Separate from this binary is the notion that the strategic omission of information in and of itself constitutes a type of sexual education — at the very least, in that it causes students to search elsewhere to learn about sex. This type of self-curated sexual education as a form of education is one topic I explore in this thesis. If sex is socio-culturally constructed, what is the site of construction? Ultimately, I argue that students responded to the abstinence-only education at Saint Margaret’s in paradoxical ways that help to illuminate the complicated nature of sexual education, sexual agency, conformity, and resistance.

What is Sexual Education?

One must first ask, did we – the graduates of the all-girls Catholic school Saint Margaret’s – receive sexual education? The answer is more complicated than one might think. While trying to define sexual education to preface this research, finding one universal definition across different organizations and institutions proved difficult. This difficulty in and of itself is representative of a more significant incongruity in our country. What is considered comprehensive sexual education is viewed very differently among various populations in the United States. Thus, the topic of sexual education is vital for cultural anthropologists to explore and unpack, given its highly embedded cultural significance across multiple groups.

The Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that seeks to advance the sexual and reproductive health and rights, defines comprehensive sexual education as a rights-based
approach that seeks to, “equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality – physically and emotionally, individually and in relationships.”

The Seven Essential Components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education, as defined by the Guttmacher Institute, include gender, sexual and reproductive health and HIV, sexual rights and sexual citizenship, pleasure, violence, diversity, and relationships. The website adds, “This approach recognizes and accepts all people as sexual beings and is concerned with more than just the prevention of disease or pregnancy.”

Similarly, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) has six critical concepts included in *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education*: human development, relationships, personal skills, sexual behavior, sexual health, and society and culture. These secular institutions emphasize the need for non-judgmental, information-rich sexual education with both biology and lifestyle foci. To the Catholic Church’s disliking, in December 2015, SIECUS released the issue brief, “A Call to Action: LGBTQ Youth Need Inclusive Sex Education.” This article emphasized the missed opportunities to support the youth of all genders and sexual orientations in the classroom setting. Both SIECUS and the Guttmacher Institute seek to enhance young people’s enjoyment of sex and sexual health, regardless of identity.

In stark contrast to these definitions of comprehensive sexual education are the approaches to sexuality advanced by Catholic organizations. The Pontifical Council for the

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3 Ibid.
Family, established by Pope John Paul II in 1981, created a document outlining Catholic church-approved sexual education, called *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (TMHS). This document is considered “comprehensive and entirely in accord with the Catholic tradition” and is praised and summarized by the Catholic Education Resource Center:

1. Human sexuality is a sacred mystery and must be presented according to the doctrinal and moral teaching of the Church, always bearing in mind the effects of original sin.
2. Only information proportionate to each phase of their individual development should be presented to children and young people.
3. No material of an erotic nature should be presented to children or young people of any age, individually or in a group.
4. No one should ever be invited, let alone obliged, to act in any way that could objectively offend against modesty or that could subjectively offend against his or her own delicacy or sense of privacy.

*The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* emphasizes the parents’ role in educating their children about chastity, temperance, fortitude, and prudence. Explicitly, TMHS says, “parents must reject secularized and antinatalist sex education, which puts God at the margin of life and regards the birth of a child as a threat.” In this case, the conditions for comprehensive sexual

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7 Ibid.
education, defined by the Pontifical Council for the Family, not only deviate from secular definitions but actively call for the rejection of secular sexual education.

Another Catholic text, Theology of the Body (TOB), a pedagogical series given by Pope John Paul II, details the Catholic expectations surrounding human sexuality. This text hits closer to home for me since my all-girls Catholic school used an adapted summary of Pope John Paul II’s catechesis, the *Theology of the Body for Teens* textbooks and video lessons, in the classroom as instructional tools. The messages in Pope John Paul II’s catechesis and the *TOB for Teens* curriculum are consistent with the Catholic views explicated above. In essence, these messages operate under heteronormative assumptions and make essentialized claims about the nature of men and women. In chapters one, two, and four, I will explain more about these lessons and their contribution to students’ interpretations of gender roles, sexual desire, and shame. I also connect Foucauldian surveillance, resistance, and conformity to the way students interact with their school’s policies.

**The Contemporary Case for Comprehensive Sexual Education**

The contemporary case for comprehensive sexual education arose in part as a reaction to the opposition from religious conservatives. Around the 1960s and 1970s, religious conservatives built a movement on discouraging public schools from offering sexual education (Irvine 2002). Sex education was credited for promoting promiscuity and moral depravity. Around this time, groups of parents started protesting sex-ed programs. Sex ed supporters grew in number in the 1980s when the AIDS pandemic began. However, at the same time,

conservatives launched their own version of sex education programs, branded as abstinence education. The federal government allocated millions of dollars to abstinence programs with the 1996 Welfare Reform Act (Cornblatt 2009). Between 1996 and Fiscal Year 2018, Congress allocated over $2.1 billion into abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs, rebranded to sexual-risk-avoidance-education (SRAE) in 2016.9 Discussion of sexuality, many parents feared, would lead to promiscuity, confusion, or outright damage” (Irvine 2002, 48). By the end of the nineties, opposition to comprehensive sex education became a central goal of national organizations, like Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, and the Rutherford Institute (Irvine 2002, 69).

Utilizing strong emotions helped the Christian Right spur supporters to action and combat those in favor of formal sexual education. Irvine argues that “the discursive politics of sex education are contests over the meanings and emotional culture of sexuality” (Irvine 2002, 142). She adds that politicized emotions were drawn on as a resource to slow the progress of comprehensive sexual education, arguing that this practice of emotional discourse, intended to evoke strong feelings, was another cause of the polarization of sexual education debates. This era marked what Irvine calls the “days of rage” (2002, 142).

Since the ‘days of rage,’ more scholars and ethicists have called for more comprehensive sexual education. Specifically, the bulk of contemporary scholarship focused on comprehensive sexual education is concerned with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the spread of STDs, teen pregnancy, and LGBTQ issues. Generally, these scholars have shifted over the years from considering sex education as primarily teen pregnancy and STD prevention to a wellness-based sex education that is inclusive to all. Progressive politics of inclusion, feminism,
and public health concerns inform this body of scholarship. The scholarship that does address sexual pleasure does not explicitly address the lived realities of Catholic women or women that grew up in Catholic institutions.

Scholars have demonstrated time and time again that comprehensive sexual education has the potential to decrease the alarming rates of teen pregnancy and the spread of STDs in the U.S. A 2008 study compared the effects of comprehensive sexual education programs and abstinence-only programs on students’ contraceptive use and postponement of engaging in sexual intercourse. The results indicated that most abstinence programs did not delay the initiation of sex. Instead, the comprehensive programs positively affected young people’s sexual behavior, including their condom and contraceptive use and delaying initiation of sex. The authors suggest widespread usage of comprehensive sex-ed programs to combat the increasing rates of teen pregnancy and STDs (Kohler, Manhart, and Lafferty 2008). Another study addresses some parents’ concerns that increasing sexual education to include contraceptive use would encourage adolescents to initiate sexual intercourse earlier. The results show that teaching about contraception did not increase the risk of adolescent sexual activity or STDs; instead, adolescents who received comprehensive sex education had a lower risk of pregnancy than adolescents who received abstinence-only or no sex education (Kirby 2008). A 2011 study goes further to demonstrate that increasing emphasis on abstinence education is positively correlated with teenage pregnancy and birth rates (Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011).

Many of the papers on intellectual and developmental disabilities and sexual education also call for more comprehensive and more inclusive sexual education. One relatively old paper addresses the effectiveness of different sex-ed programs. It points out a weakness in the sexual education provided to people with disabilities: “most programs have focused on the transmission
of knowledge, and not on the development of positive attitudes toward sexuality” (Whitehouse and McCabe 1997, 229). A newer study looks at families’ perspectives regarding their adolescents’ sexual development. The findings show more caution among mothers of young people with intellectual disabilities about their children’s readiness to learn about sex. The paper aims to help families encourage the sexual development of children with disabilities (Pownall, Jahoda, and Hastings 2012). Furthermore, some scholars have called for more comprehensive sexual education for people with disabilities by connecting sexual intimacy with quality of life (McCabe, Cummins, and Deeks 2000).

From another angle, a public health issue brief also aims to promote the sexual health and wellbeing of ‘patients’ with disabilities. The paper’s main takeaway is: “sex education is a must and should include the following: Basic facts of life, reproduction, and sexual intercourse; human growth and development; human reproduction and anatomy; self-pleasuring/masturbation and the use of sexual aids; intimacy and privacy; pregnancy and childbirth; contraception and abortion; family life and parenthood; sexual response and consensual sex; sexual orientation; sexual abuse; HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases” (Neufeld et al. 2002, 857). These findings are consistent with the trend in other contemporary literature, in that they assert that the question should not be whether to provide sex education, but how to effectively provide sex education.

Another trend in contemporary literature on sexual education has signaled greater acceptance of inclusive sexual education for LGBTQ youth. A 2015 article asserts that more inclusive sex education is needed for LGBTQ youth, not necessarily for health outcomes but to reduce bullying of non-heteronormative students. This study found that LGBTQ-inclusive curricula were associated with higher reports of safety at the individual and school levels and
lower levels of bullying at the school level. The amount of support also mattered. Supportive curricula allowed LGBTQ youth to feel safer at their schools (Snapp et al. 2015). A more recent study addresses conservative and religious parents’ concerns that children who learn about LGBTQ issues in school will start to engage in same-sex practices, and schools can force new views on children that contrast their parents’ religious or political ideologies. This psycho-behavioral study establishes that students’ sexual orientation does not change upon receiving inclusive sex-ed. Furthermore, the study asserts that teachers as role models do not change students’ gender and sexual identities, and sexual minority students currently suffer from bullying in school. The authors posit that LGBT inclusive sex ed will have positive effects for both heterosexual students and students belonging to sexual minorities (Gegenfurtner and Gebhardt 2017).

Some scholars have demonstrated the exclusive nature of formal sexual education curriculums for LGBTQ students by showing the other resources that sexual minority students accessed for unanswered questions. In the Journal of LGBT Youth, Bittner writes about young adult literature with LGBTQ content as a source of sex and sexuality information for young non-heteronormative students. The author argues that this type of literature provides students with a relatively safe space to explore sexuality away from potentially homophobic and transphobic peers (Bittner 2012). Another paper shows that sex education classrooms exclude many youths’ sexuality and same-sex sexual behaviors. The study also shows that young gay, bisexual, and questioning men turned to other sources, like online resources, to answer their questions about sex and sexuality (Pingel et al. 2013). My research, likewise, will shed light on what resources students (specifically all-girls Catholic school students) turn to when their sexuality-related questions go unanswered.
Both Bittner’s and other scholars’ papers have notably focused on the male experience. All of Bittner’s and Pingel’s interviewees were male. There is even an article that speaks to the non-hetero male experience within abstinence-only sex education curriculums (Fisher 2009). Fisher, like the other contemporary scholars I have written about above, argues for more inclusive sexual education curriculums. These articles undoubtedly contribute invaluable data to the existing collection of narratives on silence, hostility, and resilience within existing sexual education curriculums.

However, one important demographic is still missing: girls. I hope to reconcile this through my research on women graduates of an all-girls Catholic school. To summarize, the bulk of the contemporary literature on sexual or sexuality education has seen a shift toward acceptance of comprehensive sex education. The scholarship on sexual education in secular contexts exists and seems to push toward more inclusive sex ed. However, very few sources specifically speak to Catholic school women’s relationships to sexual pleasure and agency.

**Children, Sexual Knowledge and Gender Identity**

The understanding of children and sexuality together historically has shifted and increased the perceived need for comprehensive sexual education in contemporary literature. The secular West has historically emphasized childhood sexual innocence and viewed its preservation as being at odds with offering formal sexual education. “Childhood innocence has become a talisman adults hold up against all evil, doubt, and despair. No – not all childhood innocence – only childhood sexual innocence” (Higonnet 2009, 111). Influenced by Anne Higonnet, Janice Irvine’s writing speaks to the notion of the Romantic child, or “our modern
image of a naturally asexual, pure childhood”: the child’s innocence depends on protection from sexuality, which may mean never being exposed to sexuality-related information (2002, 13).

Within the broader American culture, the Christian right and other abstinence-only advocates have used the protection of the Romantic child as a moral argument to oppose comprehensive sexual education. A 1998 study done on the social impacts of in-class sexual education in North Carolina found that conservative Christian mothers thought that as sexuality education made female sexuality knowable, it “compromised girls’ chastity and made girls vulnerable to male aggression” (Fields and Parker 2007, 66). Abstinence-only education was thus viewed as a type of protection for female students. This study established that Christian mothers did not want their children exposed to “sexual knowledge,” given the perception that a lack of exposure to sexuality-related information would protect young girls. This theme of lack of sexual knowledge as a form of protection for the Romantic child becomes significant in the ways Saint Margaret’s administrators and teachers treated the students and their sexual curiosities. My Catholic school’s teachers and administrators viewed the notion of abstinence-only curriculums as protection for the students. Curriculums lacked sexuality-related information and centered on maintaining the “innocence” of young girls, an intentional effort stemming from the original, Biblical Fall from Innocence, which I explain in Chapter One. Both secular and religious contexts have thus historically viewed comprehensive sexual education and the maintenance of childhood sexual innocence as mutually exclusive.

Over time, the discourse surrounding childhood sexuality shifted to one that acknowledges the Knowing child, a concept first put forth by SIECUS founder, Mary Calderone. The Knowing child, though pure and deserving of protection like the Romantic child, possesses sexuality and complicated emotions (Irvine 2002, 14). This approach to understanding children
acknowledges that children do have access to sexuality and sexual information and distinguishes sexual innocence from sexual ignorance. As the world progressively becomes more digitally connected, the students I know are becoming more and more like the Knowing child, with increased access to what Fields and Parker call “sexual knowledge” (Fields and Parker 2007, 67). Not only did Saint Margaret’s students have access to sexual knowledge, they actively sought out sexuality-related information from wherever they could find it. Abstinence-only curriculums did not dampen students’ sexual curiosities; the lack of information, instead, motivated these students – Knowing children – to actively pursue unfiltered information elsewhere for private consumption. This quest for sexual knowledge becomes pertinent to one of my main questions: Given the lack of information about sex in school, what are these students privately consuming?

Yet, the issue is not merely about the raw content to which young people have access. It is about how young people collect, interpret, and digest bits of such information to craft their worldviews and identities. Increasingly, comprehensive sexual education is starting to be considered an integral aspect of young people’s broader learning and development of gender identity. In Jessica Field’s study, having access to sexual knowledge did not encourage young students to have sexual experiences, as conservative Christian mothers feared (Fields and Parker 2007). The value of young girls having access to sexual knowledge, Fields argues, was that it gave answers to young girls’ questions of identity, desires, and practices.

Similarly, Michelle Fine’s The Missing Discourse of Desire explains how formal sexual education classes contribute to the construction of gender. She analyzes how some sex-ed curriculums and dialogues essentialize female sexuality as something to protect against heteronormative male desire, leaving female sexual pleasure entirely out of the conversation (Fine 1988). Consequently, at least in the context of contemporary scholarship, the issue of
sexual education has been broadened to include understanding of gender identity, among other things. In secular, liberal contexts, it seems the case for comprehensive sexual education is evident. But what about in conservative Catholic communities and institutions, such as Saint Margaret’s?

**Catholic Women and Sexuality**

The case for comprehensive sexual education in Catholic contexts is not as clear. One study on the Catholic Church and morality in the sexual lives of Mexican immigrant women found several connections between sex life and religion, and more importantly, various tensions between religious ideologies and personal subjectivities. Gloria González-López found the following dynamics:

- Women not only become aware of the patriarchal nature of the Catholic Church as an institution but also perceive it as incompetent to regulate women’s sexuality.
- Women who are aware of gender oppression and contradictions promoted by regressive sexual moralities do not automatically reject the Church nor stop exercising their religious practices (González-López and Parker 2007, 149).

The notion of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, becomes significant as individuals’ identities interact with one another, and in this case, mitigate and qualify aspects of their other identities. The notion of intersectionality addresses “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world works” (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). For instance, this study found that this group of Mexican women, as minorities, mediated Catholic teachings on sexual morality based on their “personal subjectivities” as women (González-López
and Parker 2007, 149). In other words, intersections of multiple identities influence women’s interactions with the world around them. In my research project, I found that students at Saint Margaret’s, aware of specific patriarchal structures within Catholicism, experienced tensions between their Catholic identities and identities as women. Other tensions exist in my interlocutors’ identities concerning socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and race. Since I will explore identity politics in this paper, I must at least briefly mention intersectionality. I wish to consider intersectionality throughout the body of my thesis to acknowledge the heterogeneity within the studied group of women and to further nuance the interactions between institution and individual.

Karen Ross’s PhD dissertation, “Deconstructing the ‘Good Catholic Girl’: A Critique of Sexual Pedagogies for Young Women in Catholic Ethics” (2018), explores the lives of teenage girls in Catholic school. This dissertation introduces the reader to Christian theology and ethics, Catholic teachings about sex and gender, and how young Catholic girls are interpreting and interacting with these dogmas. My research is different in methodology in that I incorporate some of my own experiences into my writing (autoethnography), and that my interlocutors are graduates of a Catholic school, actively reflecting on their experiences while at Catholic school. The lens that accompanies interlocutors looking back on their own experiences enriches the data since it provides a past, present, and potentially, a future in which we can understand all-girls Catholic school graduates’ trajectories. Additionally, I include the experiences and dialogues of students who went to all-girls Catholic school but are not Catholic or do not come from Catholic families. Furthermore, Ross’s dissertation only utilizes heterosexual collaborators, while my interlocutors manifest a range of sexual orientations and experiences. Lastly, my methodology is
unique because my project is informed by interviews with the all-girls Catholic school’s teachers to supplement the students’ experience and paint a broader picture of the whole culture.

**Theoretical Framework**

One key conceptual framework that I use in this thesis is the notion of agency, a concept initially used to explore the individual capacity to act. The term gained currency among scholars in the 1970s as activists aimed to achieve gender and racial equality, and many disciplines attempted to address “structuralism’s failure to take into account the actions of individuals” (Ahearn 1999, 12). Sociologist Anthony Giddens, along with anthropologists Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins, focused on the ways in which individuals’ actions “are dialectically related to social structure in a mutually constitutive manner” (Ahearn 1999, 12). The school of thought surrounding how individuals both shape and are shaped by society has been called “practice theory” by Sherry Ortner (2006, 129). Ortner adds that agency is embedded in webs of relations and is “part of the process of... the making and remaking of larger social and cultural formations” (2006, 134). While people may have agency inasmuch as they are able to act, Ortner reminds us that the actions of truly social beings are always confined to the structures that make up their social worlds.

More recently, scholars, such as Islamic studies anthropologist Saba Mahmood, have attempted to further complicate the definition, as I hope to do so here. In my analysis of Catholic school girls’ experiences, I divide the concept of agency into three parts: agency in the form of explicit resistance to Catholic norms, agency in the form of explicit conformity, and lastly, implicit or hidden resistance to Catholic doctrine, which makes up the space between conformity...
and resistance. All of these can be considered agentive acts. Hidden or implicit resistance, which occupies the space between conformity and resistance, are acts that may seem conformant but are internally more nuanced. I argue that both conformity and resistance, in this case, require a level of agency.

Figure 1. Conformity, resistance, and implicit resistance

While some scholars use agency as a synonym for resistance, others theorize that “agentive acts may also involve complicity with, accommodation to, or reinforcement of the status quo” (Ahearn 1999, 13). According to Saba Mahmood, agency is not only the capacity for change, but also “the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist” (2011, 217). Mahmood argues that agency should not be defined merely in terms of resistance against the dominating ideologies. Instead, she argues, specifically in feminist anthropology, that agency should include one’s decision to act per societal expectations and norms. Her fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt highlights how a group of young Muslim women use the hijab not only as a means to tutor themselves in the practice of piety but also as a marker of piety (Mahmood 2011, 158). Although the hijab may
be considered an example of the subjection of women’s bodies to patriarchal valuations, Mahmood argues that there are alternative ways to frame such actions within her definition of agency. While the women wear the hijab to maintain their piety, these compliant acts go beyond mere obedience and are experienced by the women to involve purposeful choice, effort, and agency (Mahmood 2011, 158). The nuance and significance of these women’s agency is neglected when their actions are understood solely in terms of women’s subordination within the Islamic identity.

To avoid creating a simplistic binary of resistance and conformity, scholars should include in the concept of women’s agency one’s choice to suffer and persist under patriarchy. In other words, in order to successfully analyze women’s agency in Islamic or Catholic teachings, we must decouple the concept of agency from the concept of social change and recognize that there still may be opportunities to exercise agency in seemingly restrictive sexual cultures. As Mahmood explains, “We can no longer presume that secular reason and morality exhaust the forms of valuable human flourishing” (2011, 225). Even under patriarchal structures, Mahmood’s informants are able to make choices within the parameters of certain social constraints. We should not analyze the effects of women’s practices merely in terms of their role in reinforcing or undermining structures of male domination. Agency is more complex than that. Mahmood argues, “to analyze people’s actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is to necessarily reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination” (2011, 222). Looking at binary terms of resistance and subordination are insufficient to capture women’s authentic motivations, desires, and goals. Rather, we must recognize agency within relations of subordination and that, while some forms of agency reach for social change, others aim toward continuity and stasis.
Thus, I will use agency as a framework to identify the ways Saint Margaret’s graduates neither wholly resist nor wholly conform to Catholic expectations and norms. In this thesis, I will use the term agency to describe multiple forms of choice, including acts that conform to the Catholic doctrine (e.g., waiting until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse), acts that explicitly resist the structures of power (e.g., watching pornography, using contraception, masturbating), and acts of implicit rebellion embedded in the dominating systems of power (e.g., acceptance of and embellishment of the school uniform). I wish to observe the spaces in between explicit conformity and explicit resistance, as my interlocutors’ lived realities often reflect both subtle acceptances of and detachments from Catholic dogma in various ways.

James Scott, in Weapons of the Weak (1985), analyzed the ways in which peasants in an agrarian village privately resisted or utilized small-scale strategies of resistance against the rich and powerful actors. There were countless reasons why the villagers would not be able to explicitly or publicly deviate from the society’s norms (e.g., risking their jobs and financial security, endangering themselves or their families, etc.), but this does not mean resistance was nonexistent. Scott argues that when power structures heavily regulate and surveil the subordinate class, resistance does not disappear; it goes underground. Similarly, in the context of Saint Margaret’s, there are many reasons why a student might feel hesitant to display open signs of rebellion since such actions could be met with suspension, bad grades, or social ostracization. Yet, hidden or implicit resistance occurred in the privacy of the students’ homes or the privacy of their laptops. Furthermore, in some cases, students participated in mildly deviant behavior in public, or what Scott calls “everyday forms of resistance,” walking the line between conformity and resistance, as long as the behavior would not get them into serious trouble (Scott 1985, 34).
while using a “hidden transcript” in private. Scott describes hidden transcripts as antihegemonic discourse, “disguised, muted, and veiled for safety’s sake,” a strategy of symbolic resistance that can be used by the subordinate class without negative repercussions (Scott 1990b, 137). Studying only subordinate’s public actions, then, will result in an inaccurate depiction of their authentic thoughts, beliefs, and relationships to the people in power. We must study both public and private life to gain a holistic picture of our interlocutors’ genuine beliefs, which are sometimes not as acquiescent as their public behavior may seem. The Saint Margaret’s graduates ultimately did resort to methods of hidden resistance away from the surveillant school, in order to learn more about sex and sexuality.

My question of how graduates of my all-girls Catholic school construct sex, given such restrictive circumstances, aligns with the ways other scholars have discussed sexual education, in the sense that I acknowledge there is a problem. The number of teenage girls who were pregnant or engaged in premarital sexual relations at my school is indicative of this. Both secular minds and Catholic morality-focused advocates can agree that the high teen pregnancy rate is nationally concerning and marks the ineffectiveness of our current sex education programs. This thesis’s argument is in agreement with other contemporary scholars in that I write under the assumption that comprehensive sexual education may have positive health outcomes for students.

Unlike other academics, however, I would also like to prioritize discussions of pleasure and access to pleasure among Catholic school women graduates. By focusing on pleasure as opposed to danger, I hope to avoid the mistake of overemphasizing sexual risk and victimization. Carole Vance, in *Pleasure and Danger*, writes, “To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases
the sexual terror and despair in which women live.” (1984, 1). I hope to capture the joys and pleasures of sex and sexuality, to balance out the dialogue surrounding risk and danger normally associated with sexual education and to help illuminate the nature of women’s sexual agency. In Catholic education, sex is accompanied not only by physical risk – engaging in sexual activity also bears moral and spiritual risk. My observations from attending Catholic school reaffirm that many have already invested a considerable amount of energy and attention in preaching the risks associated with sexual gratification. I seek to complement valid research on the dangers of sex by contributing original qualitative research on the construction of sex, pleasure, and sexual agency among all-girls Catholic school graduates.

My argument comprises of two components. The first examines and explains the sexual and political culture within my all-girls Catholic school. I examine the theology class curriculums, policies and regulations, rituals, and dialogues in Chapters 1, 2, and 3. The second component explicates how, under such circumstances, individuals consume self-curated sexual education in private settings, are exposed to sex-related information in highly individualized, isolated ways, and construct sex through sexual experiences. I use recorded interviews with my fellow graduates and excerpts from my diaries, written at the time of Catholic school attendance. Thus, I hope to show how, under various pressures and expectations, graduates from one all-girls Catholic school create meaning for and understand sex and pleasure in agentive ways.

**Methodology**

In order to analyze the school’s inner workings, I began by analyzing my own experiences since I attended my Catholic school from kindergarten through twelfth grade. These
experiences became a natural motive for my research since, after graduation, I had many concerns about how my school taught sex and sexuality and the impacts the education had on me years later. I examined my old curriculums and class assignments from school, mainly related to the ideas of chastity and abstinence, alongside 24 of my old diaries, four of which detail many of my early sexual experiences and thoughts.

Next, I interviewed eight of the alumnae of Saint Margaret’s in order to triangulate and validate my accounts of our school’s teachings. I first reached out to people with whom I felt most comfortable; I contacted my old friend, Jennifer. While I attended our Catholic school from kindergarten, Jennifer joined in eighth grade. We first met each other during homeroom, a supervised thirty-minute period at the beginning of the day before classes start. We had many mutual friends, as we were part of the same social circle. Additionally, we are both considered hapa-haole, which means half white. She is part-white, part-Japanese, and comes from an upper-middle-class family. I am half Eastern European Ashkenazi Jewish, half Chinese, and also come from an upper-middle-class family. While neither of us is Catholic, our parents chose to send us to Saint Margaret’s because of the perceived quality of the education. Jennifer and I had a recorded conversation through a video chat platform for a little over an hour on October 9th, 2019, and I brought up my research topic after filling in the gaps of what she had missed in my life the past few years. It had been three years since we spoke extensively. Once I brought up my research, explaining my potential methodology, she eagerly volunteered to help with my project. She suggested that I also reach out to our mutual friend from school, Amber.

After having a recorded conversation with Jennifer, I took her advice. Amber, passionate about sexual education, agreed to have a recorded conversation with me as well. Amber was another member of our high school social circle. She is black and grew up with two Christian
parents, both in the military. Similar to both my story and Jennifer’s story, her parents chose to send her to Saint Margaret’s because of the quality of education and scholarship money. While Jennifer identifies as straight, Amber identifies as bisexual. She started attending Saint Margaret’s in fifth grade.

I reached out to another classmate, Crystal, who grew up with a single Catholic mother. We became close by performing in our school’s marching band together. Crystal joined Saint Margaret’s in fifth grade and was sent there because of the religious values her mother and grandmother wanted the institution to instill in her. Crystal is part Hawaiian and part Puerto Rican. Crystal was not part of my main circle of close friends in high school, but we had many mutual friends and knew each other well enough due to the small student body. She got a job as a house cleaner after graduating high school, met her boyfriend in November and married him three months later.

Lastly, I contacted Katherine, who enrolled in Saint Margaret’s in middle school due to her family’s Catholic values and one of her older sisters’ positive memories at the school. Katherine attended a co-ed Catholic school before Saint Margaret’s. Her family is white and middle class. That Katherine is still a practicing Catholic today distinguishes her from this project’s other informants. While Crystal grew apart from her Catholic values in late high school, primarily due to personal subjectivities and desires, Katherine held tight to her faith amidst her evolving relationship with herself and her identity as a woman. The struggles that Katherine encountered during high school or the aspects of the sexual education curriculum with which she disagreed are expectedly different from what other informants experienced. As Crenshaw said in a lecture on intersectional feminism, “we might have to broaden our scope of how we think about where women are vulnerable, because different things make different women
vulnerable.” Consequently, Katherine’s understanding of sex is bound to be different than those of other graduates; her fears, anxieties, concerns, are all unique. Her background also necessitates that she uses agency in unique ways that more closely fit her inner reality, which primarily embraces Catholic values.

Throughout my recorded conversations with old friends, some questions surrounding institutional accountability and our teachers’ roles and responsibilities arose. The next reasonable step was to interview my high school teachers, including the nuns who taught my theology classes. I reached out to Mrs. Brown via Facebook. She was my English teacher in high school and had a reputation for being a politically conservative, devout Catholic. I also contacted Mrs. Novak, who was my math teacher for several years. I remember she started every class with a prayer. I emailed Ms. Santos, who taught my theology classes during my senior year of high school and who had recently accepted a promotion to become the Head of the Theology Division at Saint Margaret’s. I emailed Sister Mary and Sister Adna, who had retired from teaching since I left but still maintained a presence on campus if students wanted to say hello. I met them at the convent across the street from the school, where they lived and worked. I am happy to say that we engaged in a rich, illuminating conversation, thanks to their openness and generosity. I contacted the new Head of School but received no response.

Autoethnography

I chose to write this thesis as a semi-autoethnography for a few reasons. When I realized I still had over twenty of my diaries from the time I attended Saint Margaret’s, it dawned on me that I am, or could be, a case study for my research. Of course, we all have memories from the times we were in high school, but I could not rely on memory for primary observations. My diaries, on the other hand, are written observations of thoughts, feelings, cultural rituals, events, and activities that happened during my attendance at Catholic school. They are, thus, a kind of unprocessed collection of field notes. Since my diaries act as a kind of physical evidence, having access to these diaries strengthens my autoethnographic methodology. Some scholars have defined autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010, 273). Thus, I will use my personal experiences via my diaries and other primary sources to help paint a picture of the culture at Saint Margaret’s.

Additionally, to write truthfully, I believe it is important to include my presence when describing both the studied group – the graduates of Saint Margaret’s – and how the group was studied (unstructured interviews and conversations). I wish to give priority to individual realities, as opposed to cultural realities. Ruth Behar, in The Vulnerable Observer, describes the irony of writing this way: “…anthropology has always been rooted in an ‘I’ – understood as having complex psychology and history – observing a ‘we’ that, until recently, was viewed as plural, ahistorical, and nonindividuated” (1996, 26). Writing in a semi-autoethnographic style hopefully allows me to better acknowledge my positionality and place throughout my research project.
Autoethnography comes with its disadvantages, too. Behar writes, “In anthropology, which historically exists to ‘give voice’ to others, there is no greater taboo than self-revelation” (Behar 1996, 26). Autoethnography, aside from carrying its own taboos, also comes with logistical challenges. Conducting interviews with old friends and teachers is challenging for multiple reasons. It is awkward. People do not like to talk about themselves. As a writer, conducting autoethnographic research proves challenging because one might find oneself too close to the data to be able to identify what needs more background information or what cultural outsiders might find interesting. What cultural insiders and cultural outsiders find interesting is often very different. On this note, differentiating between emic and etic stances becomes challenging in autoethnographic research, with emic representing the views from inside a social group and etic representing the views from outside of that particular social group. Furthermore, my stance, as primarily a cultural insider to Catholic institutions, prevents me from being able to make conclusive comparisons between institutions. Since I am limited to my own experiences at this singular institution, Saint Margaret’s, my research is limited to a small set of interlocutors who are not wholly representative of the larger Catholic community.

Another challenge of my methodology was the lack of a physical field site. In utilizing physical sites of study, ethnographers can map out the rich history of places, how space shapes culture and vice versa. If the population I wished to study was one school’s graduates, now spread across the globe, what would my field site be? What does participant-observation look like when an anthropologist does not have a specific geographic location in which she participates and observes? Reconstituting the experience of attending Saint Margaret’s through analyzing my old diaries and class assignments became a process not unlike rereading and examining old field notes.
At the start of my study, I assumed that I would be largely unsurprised with the data collected from interviews since the Catholic Church had essentially raised me. I was partly right and partly wrong. Due to the secret and hidden nature of discourse on sexuality within my all-girls Catholic school, my interviews with interlocutors marked some of the first conversations about sex I had with fellow students from my school. There was a lot to unpack and catch up on! Within my social circle, many answers were predictable due to my familiarity with the interlocutors. However, outside of my social circle, I found conversations to be extremely enlightening, demonstrating the wide range of experiences women could have at the same institution.

Chapter Overview

To explore how graduates of Saint Margaret’s come to understand sex and sexuality, I will first dive into the Catholic teachings on sex and sexuality. Then, I will focus on students’ reactions and sexual trajectories. Chapter One will explain how the Bible is used to teach female sexuality and how these messages were first interpreted by Pope John Paul II, then turned into a national theology curriculum called Theology of the Body for Teens. Turning the attention to the Bible is important since it is the foundational text that serves as the basis for all Catholic values. Thus, the way the Bible positions female sexuality influences how it is taught at Saint Margaret’s. Chapter Two will convey how Saint Margaret’s students interpreted pieces of the curriculum, such as the Theology of the Body for Teens lessons, the marriage project, and the flour sack baby daily diaries project as primarily about shame, danger, and responsibility. Chapter Three will explain the policies and regulations at Saint Margaret’s that influence the way
students view themselves and each other. Specifically, this chapter will cover the cases of a few pregnant students, the administration’s response, and other students’ interpretations of these events. Thus, I will show how the interaction between the school administration and student body becomes a distinct form of sexual education. Chapter Four contains narrative descriptions of my interlocutors’ sexual trajectories. This will demonstrate the difference between conceptualizing and “doing” sex, placing emphasis on how the various sexual education lessons manifest themselves in students’ lived experiences. As my thesis progresses, the focus will shift from textual analysis to narrative descriptions of observations and experiences. Ultimately, this thesis will prove that, through the lens of my lived experience, all-girls Catholic school students respond to morality-based sexual education curriculums in paradoxical ways that demonstrate the complicated nature of sexual learning and agency.

Why should anyone care?

Students will be exposed to sexual information, regardless of whether or not their schools teach abstinence-only education (Orenstein 2016a). The question is how we want them to learn about sex. By teaching young girls with abstinence-only curriculums, schools must expect that students will consume self-curated sexual education, which defeats the purpose of the omission of sexuality-related information in the first place. Schools could try to “protect” their students, instead, by giving them sexual knowledge. By giving young girls information about sexuality and destigmatizing the conversations surrounding sex, they may not need to consult other sources or, in extreme cases, actually engage in sexual activity in order to learn more about it.
Abstinence-only classes are not working: “By not teaching about sexuality, or by teaching sex-negative attitudes, schools apparently will not forestall sexual activity, but may well discourage responsible contraception” (Fine 1988, 77).

Furthermore, the issue is no longer just about the spread of STDs and teen pregnancy. The issue is now about feminism. Women must become the owners of their sexualities, the masters (or mistresses) of their pleasure. “Inside the hegemony of what they call The Law of the Father, female desire and pleasure can gain expression only in the terrain already charted by men. In the public-school arena, this constriction of what is called sexuality allows girls one primary decision — to say yes or no — to a question not necessarily their own” (Fine 1988, 81). Our society must move toward dialogues that prioritize women’s sexual pleasure. Carole Vance articulates her vision of the future for feminism: “It is not enough to move women away from danger and oppression; it is necessary to move toward something: toward pleasure, agency, self-definition. Feminism must increase women’s pleasure and joy, not just decrease our misery” (1984, 24). I hope that by prioritizing the voices and experiences of my interlocutors from a small, all-girls Catholic institution, I can be a part of a cultural paradigm shift toward women’s pleasure and joy.

The Bible is used as the foundational text to teach female sexuality within the context of the Roman Catholic Church. These scriptures are the core texts that form the basis for all Catholic values. Reliance on such texts to define a particular group has its origins in the philosophy of Essentialism. Essentialism is the belief that certain groups (e.g., women versus men) are born with certain unchangeable traits, or that the characteristics they display are inevitable in some ways due to their identity. *Theology of the Body for Teens* and Pope John Paul II’s interpretation of the Bible paint an essentialist picture, simplifying gender roles into a heteronormative binary. This binary assumes that the genders are opposite one another. This type of view also establishes a rather narrow gender expectation for Catholic women. Building such a narrow morality-based sexual education curriculum denies the paradoxical and complicated nature of sexual education. Chapter One will explain the *Theology of the Body for Teens* curriculum, exploring the ways the Bible positions female sexuality.

This chapter examines the core of Saint Margaret’s sexual education curriculum, *Theology of the Body for Teens*, as well as the ways this curriculum is influenced by Biblical interpretation. The curriculum put forth by Saint Margaret’s, in some ways, constitutes one aspect of Catholic sexual culture, in that it “provides its own plan or ‘cookie-cutter’ blueprint for how individuals’ sexuality will unfold across each epoch of development” (Herdt 2006, 10). Each section will begin by explaining the key messages in the *TOB for Teens* curriculum, followed by where they come from within the Bible and other relevant Catholic sources. I will
also identify pieces of sexual scripts, or the “necessary beliefs and meanings to accompany each stage of sexual development as well as the changes that occur from one life stage to the next…” (Herdt 2006, 11). (In this thesis, while a sexual script encompasses rules and spoken guidelines as to how individuals should behave, sexual culture embodies both implicit and explicit assumptions regarding sexual behavior.) The curriculum exposes students to a set of values and expectations to follow in the Catholic tradition, including guidelines for how students should manage their sexualities. Womanhood and sexuality, as defined and interpreted in the Bible, will hopefully demonstrate the complicated nature of women’s agency in the Catholic faith.

The Catholic school theology curriculum relies on the most fundamental Christian text: The Bible. Pope John Paul II gave a series of pedagogical talks in St. Peter’s Square from the years 1979 to 1984. He called the synthesis of these 129 lectures, “Human Love in the Divine Plan,” in which he interpreted various passages of the Bible to shed light on the meaning behind human sexuality.11 Years later, his catechesis became the Theology of the Body for Teens curriculum, a Catholic sexuality curriculum widely accepted across Catholic churches and institutions in the U.S. Various Catholic institutions and actors collaborated to create Theology of the Body for Teens textbooks, training sessions, and videos, meant to, “answer the questions teens and pre-teens have about their own bodies, issues on sexual morality, and how they are uniquely created for greatness.”12 Pope John Paul II interpreted the Bible to convey messages about female sexuality that ultimately influenced theology curriculums in Catholic schools everywhere, including the curriculum at Saint Margaret’s.

12 Ibid.
Each section of this chapter will begin by explaining the key messages in the TOB for Teens curriculum, followed by where they come from within the Bible and other relevant Catholic sources.

Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, or “Human Love in the Divine Plan,” catechesis contains two parts: the study of Christ’s words, analyzed in the totality of the Gospel text, and the analysis of the sacrament based on Ephesians, which goes back to the “beginning” of marriage. “Theology of the body” means the redemption of the body and the sacramentality of marriage in the Catholic faith. The body must be continually redeemed within Catholic doctrine due to Original Sin, or Eve’s Fall from Innocence, which I explain below. Within the Biblical context, female sexual agency is discussed in four parts: 1) the original unity of man and woman in Genesis, 2) purity of heart versus concupiscence based on Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, 3) sexuality and the Holy Spirit, and 4) marriage, virginity, and celibacy.

Original Unity of Man and Woman in Genesis

The study of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, sets up a paradoxical sexual script for women in the Catholic doctrine. In the Theology of the Body for Teens textbook, Chapter 1, “Created for Love,” addresses the Creation Story in the first book of the Bible in order to explain the Divine purpose of the body. This chapter of the curriculum explains that the body was made to be in communion with others and should be a sign of “the mystery of God” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 4).

Pope John Paul II said that it is impossible to understand man’s present state without reference to his beginning (meaning the Creation Story from the Bible), so we must always go
back to Adam and Eve and remember that human sinfulness is man’s original state. God said, “it is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18 New American Bible). This “helper” for the first man, Adam, was Eve. From the very beginning, sex differentiation existed, as the Bible says, “God created man in his image...male and female he created them,” and Eve is made from Adam’s rib, of the same flesh and bone (Gen 2:23).

Sexuality was also present from the beginning, as “the two will be one flesh” refers to carnal knowledge (Gen 2:24). Eve’s role seems to be purely reproductive since her name is “mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20), and her command from God is to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth!” (Gen 1:28). It is no surprise, then, that many Catholics interpret the mystery of femininity to be “revealed completely through motherhood” (Landry 2003, 5). This role of the Catholic woman is a clear example of the cultural dimension of sexual scripts, as Herdt defines them, “the specific and often gender-specific rules and beliefs for playing out a role in a particular sexual culture, institution, and social event” (2006, 11).

The impact of the Fall from Innocence or the advent of Original Sin is the locus of the Theology of the Body for Teens Chapter 3, “Naked Without Shame.” Before the Fall, Adam and Eve lived pure lives of innocence, nakedness, and happiness, knowing the difference between love and lust. Since shame comes from objectification, Adam and Eve before the Fall were “naked without shame” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 45). The effect of the Original Sin was the destruction of the Garden of Eden, God’s original plan of purity, and its replacement by a “darkened state of suffering and death” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 46).

God’s command concerning the tree of knowledge is a turning point in the creation story since it provides Adam and Eve the moment of free will and agency. Eve is the one who takes the fruit from the tree of knowledge first, exercising her agency and demonstrating her powerful
influence over Adam. Eve, in a way, causes The Fall from Innocence, or the advent of shame, which destroys the gift of communion and original innocence. After the first sin of humanity, “sexuality became an ‘obstacle’ in the personal relationship of man and woman” (Landry 2003, 7). Ere The Fall, Adam and Eve possess original nakedness, or the original good of God’s vision, the “pure” value of humanity as male and female, and the “nuptial” meaning of the body, or the meaning that men and women are created for each other in love. Pope John Paul II defines the nuptial meaning of the body as, “…the body’s capacity of expressing love, that love precisely in which the person becomes a gift and…fulfils the very meaning of his being and existence” (TOB, Jan. 16, 1980). In the Catholic faith, the sacrament of marriage fulfills the body's purpose.

The Catholic interpretation of the Bible conceptualizes freedom as a gift from God, a gift that can be misused. *Theology of the Body for Teens* Chapter 5, “Freedom and Truth,” defines free will as “the gift given to us by God that allows us to choose between good and evil [and] allows us to be the authors of our own choices, thus allowing us to determine our own destiny” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 80).

Eve’s Original Sin can be considered both agency and resistance since she resists God’s command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. For Mahmood, women can be “agentic” even when working within the constraints of expectation. Here, Eve violated a dictum from on high and directly rebelled against God’s command, which is one of the forms of agency I explore more, explicit resistance. Pope John Paul II warned his audiences of the dangers of free will: “Human freedom belongs to us as creatures; it is a freedom which is given as a gift, one to be received like a seed and to be cultivated responsibly…Freedom then is rooted in the truth about man, and it is ultimately directed toward communion” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 86.1).
Since Eve is considered the first woman, her agency sets the stage for all Catholic women, with the Creation Story marking the beginning of Catholic “sexual culture.” Although the Catholic tradition espouses that free will is a gift from God (the earliest example of free will used for resistance being The Fall from Innocence), simultaneously, the expectation is to use that free will to fulfill the nuptial meaning of the body. Thus, this interpretation of the Biblical Creation Story paints a narrow cultural sexual script for Catholic women’s lifestyles.

**Purity of Heart: Sermon on the Mount**

Strict monogamy is of utmost importance for both Catholic men and women, with lust considered a psychic form of adultery. Theology of the Body for Teens Chapter 2, “Love Defined,” inspired by Pope John Paul II’s teachings on concupiscence, explains the difference between lust and chastity. It defines lust as “a selfish desire to please oneself and treats people as objects to achieve that pleasure” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 26). Conversely, the *TOB for Teens* authors define chastity as, “the virtue that orients all our sexual desires, emotions, and attractions toward the true good of the other person, and thus, the real meaning of love” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 26). This chapter says that only chaste men and women are capable of true love. Chastity frees their association from, “that tendency to use a person which is objectively incompatible with ‘loving-kindness,’ and by so freeing it introduces into their life together and their sexual relationships a special disposition to ‘loving-kindness’” (*Love and Responsibility*, 171). Chastity and lust are thus juxtaposed. Chastity is framed as an essential part of human sexuality, whereas sexual desire becomes a dangerous evil.
In the Old Testament, equating monogamy to monotheism manifests the importance of faithful marriage and the evil of adultery. The prophets use the analogy of adultery to refer to the Chosen People’s infidelity to God by choosing various idols. Here, Yahweh is the faithful spouse, and Israel is the betraying bride. This scenario ascribes agency and resistance to the metaphorical wife figure, since she both has the capacity to act, and uses this capacity to commit adultery. This form of resistance contends one of the commandments of the Decalogue, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Deut 5:21).

Christ takes the concept of adultery to another level by saying that man gazes in conformity to what he is, and that man by his gaze reveals himself to others. This concept is called “intueri sequitur esse,” which means look follows being. Christ says, “someone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:27-28). This type of language notably omits women’s feelings of sexual desire and same-sex desire. Additionally, Proverbs 6:26 commands us, “Do not desire her beauty in your heart.” This lack of purity in mind and heart is called concupiscence, the “interior separation from the nuptial meaning of the body” (Landry 2003, 7). Concupiscence is at play when a woman becomes an object to be used by a man for intentional mental gratification, or when a gaze is lustful “knowledge” of another person. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (Rom 8:5). These passages regulate the mind's intentions; thus, this accounts for the psychic dimension of sexual culture. These psychic guidelines operate under the narrow assumption that men inevitably possess desire and pursue gratification from women, while women are desireless recipients.
Pope John Paul II interprets the Bible’s passages on concupiscence and says, “Only the nakedness that makes woman an object for a man, or vice versa, is a source of shame. The fact that they [Adam and Eve] were not ashamed means that the woman was not an ‘object’ for the man nor he for her” (TOB, Feb. 20, 1980). This interpretation goes further than the Biblical text. One might argue that this restricted agency in the sexual script for a “pure” mind protects women from objectification. However, the particular nakedness that “makes woman an object for man” is unclear and is itself the source of shame, not the objectifying male gaze. This principle gives the objectified the responsibility of managing his or her own “nakedness” to prevent objectification, while the perpetrator of objectification does not seem to be held accountable in any way.

*TOB for Teens* teaches students how to bring the lessons of purity of heart into the dating world with Chapter 11, “Dating with Purpose and Purity.” The chapter aims to demonstrate that the gift of sex is worth protecting and describe ways of staying pure without being prudish while finding a path to marriage or celibacy. The nuptial meaning of the body is demonstrated in one of the crucial concepts of the chapter: “The ultimate purpose of dating is to find a spouse” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 168). The textbook urges the students to pray for purity every morning, avoid impure relationships, and to know their boundaries. *TOB for Teens* also posits that “how far is too far” is the wrong question for students to ask because it leads with sin instead of leading with purity and holiness (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 168).

Pope John Paul II said, “Purity is the requirement of love” (TOB, Dec. 3, 1980). *TOB for Teens* suggests one way that students can “stay pure” without seeming prudish is through self-disciplined courtship. They define courtship as “getting to know the person through friendship
before moving into a dating relationship” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 170). This form of relating to another person is Church-approved since *TOB for Teens* claims that it is “low-risk.”

**Sexuality and the Holy Spirit**

The Catholic Church’s language around the body, sexuality, and the Holy Spirit set up interpersonal guidelines that govern Catholic sexual culture. *TOB for Teens* refers to the messages about the human body as the “language of the body.” The stated goal of Chapter 6, “Language of the Body,” is to show students how to view the language of the body as “the language of love” only to be expressed in the context of marriage (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 90). Students must “train” themselves for faithfulness in future marriages by practicing purity and self-control. The language of the body during intercourse is, “I give you all that I have and all that I am,” which means that the use of contraception “disorders the sexual act” by saying, “I give you some of me, but not my fertility” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 91). This model of what the “I” is does not distinguish between mind and body, making sexual intercourse a symbolic commitment or responsibility of giving one’s full self to another. This interdependent model of sexual activity particular becomes unforgettable in one of my interlocutors’ lives as she enters adulthood, which I explore in Chapter Two and Four.

The authors define contraception as, “every action before, during, or after sexual intercourse that deliberately attempts to impede its procreative potential,” and there is absolutely no ambiguity about how the Church views contraception in this chapter: “These acts [use of contraception] are intrinsically evil and always unacceptable” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 95). Although the Church acknowledges free will, this is a clear example of infringement on
sexual freedom via the Church’s unambiguous language and expectations concerning the language of the body.

Even in the context of marriage, there are ways for couples to commit sins and stray from God’s love via sexual acts. *TOB for Teens* Chapter 7, “Free, Total, Faithful, Fruitful,” says that marriage is a prerequisite for sex to be a sign of God’s love, but not a guarantee, since, “even married couples can sin with such acts as masturbation, adultery, and contraception which cannot image God’s love” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 105). *TOB for Teens* teaches that masturbation, adultery, and contraception are sins that work against God’s plan for free, total, faithful, and fruitful love. Free love means that it is given from one’s free will, or accepted with free will, as Mary freely accepted the Holy Spirit in the Immaculate Conception. Total love is the abstinence from masturbation and adultery for all time, a “living in the marriage until death” (TOB, July 11, 1984). Husbands and wives must continually renew their wedding vow through the union of flesh, the marital act of sexual relations. Faithful love means not only the abstinence from adultery but also the acceptance of God and faith in the couple’s relationship. Lastly, fruitful love requires the couple to be “open to procreation in the physical realm,” forbidding the use of contraception. Additionally, fruitful love is “life-giving in the spiritual and emotional realm” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 105).

The conditions for free, total, faithful, and fruitful love are riddled with strict interpersonal guidelines, but these guidelines, it seems, are set to protect the sacramentality or holiness of marriage. The premise of fruitful love may even be interpreted as centralizing sex in marital relations, as husband and wife supposedly renew their vows by engaging in sexual intercourse repeatedly. Pope John Paul II says, “Indeed the very words, ‘I take you as my wife – my husband’ refer not only to a determinate reality, but they can be fulfilled only by means of
conjugal intercourse. This reality [conjugal intercourse] has moreover been determined from the very beginning by the institution of the Creator…” (TOB, Jan. 5, 1983). Although these bodily expectations are restrictive in terms of their implications for sexual autonomy (both inside and outside of marital relations), they can be interpreted in a positive light, since they aim to enhance the individual’s spiritual wellbeing and connection to God’s grace.

Virginity and chastity are of utmost importance in Catholicism. Every woman is encouraged to strive to be like the Virgin Mother Mary, who bore Jesus Christ as a virgin via the “Immaculate Conception.” St. Paul calls man to holiness: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathens who do not know God” (1 Thess 4:3-5). This emphasis on the purity of the body is present in many Catholic texts, including Corinthians in the New Testament. The body is “for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor 6:13). The body’s purpose in a sexual context is in the name of faith and God. The body is also called a “temple” of the Holy Spirit, which probably implicitly refers back to Mother Mary’s Immaculate Conception, in which the Holy Spirit came down upon her to impregnate her (1 Cor 6:19). The body is considered a sacrament, or a “visible sign of an invisible reality” (Landry 2003, 19). These norms related to relations of the body can be counted as an interpersonal dimension of sexual culture, as Herdt explains, “the guides to intimate relations in dating, courtship, marriage, extramarital relations” (2006, 11). Female agency, within virginity and chastity related guidelines in Catholic sexual culture, aims toward the preservation of female bodies, and thus, their sanctity.
Marriage, Virginity, and Celibacy

The interpersonal sexual script that informs Theology of the Body catechesis’s ideals of marriage, virginity, and celibacy are based on Ephesians. Christ’s relationship to the Church is likened to spousal love in Chapter 8 of the *Theology of the Body for Teens* curriculum as well: “In Christ’s sacrificial, spousal love for the Church, we see not only God’s love for us but also a model of love for married couples” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 119).

Ephesians calls both husbands and wives to “subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). However, it seems that the role of the wife is more restricted, especially when considering three analogies that Ephesians uses to analyze marriage: Firstly, wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. Secondly, as the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject to their husbands. Lastly, husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. This metaphor implicitly narrows the role for women in the context of a marriage, since the metaphorical husband figure is God or Christ, and the metaphorical wife figure is the Church or the People of God. God is the “spouse of the chosen people.” Other quotes from Ephesians help to solidify the narrow gender roles, such as “Your Maker is your husband,” “the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,” and “the Lord has called you like a forsaken wife” (Isaiah 54:4-10). These statements all suggest women are in some way indebted to their husbands, but this relationship of domination versus subordination is, in some way, divine.
TOB for Teens Chapter 4, “Hope and Redemption in Christ,” uses this teaching to explain that humanity’s destiny is to experience redemption and the perfect “marriage” with God in heaven (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 68).

In a similar vein, Pope John Paul II, in his catechesis, likens the nuptial meaning of the body, or marriage, to redemption in Christ. Pope John Paul II makes an analogy tied to resurrection and says, “However, the redemption of the body is expressed not only in the resurrection as victory over death. It is also present in Christ’s words addressed to historical man when they confirm the principle of the indissolubility of marriage as a principle coming from the Creator himself…” (TOB, July 21, 1982). This excerpt not only encourages marriage by likening it to “victory over death,” but also condemns divorce for Catholic couples. Marriage again is framed as an essential and divine part of the meaning of human existence.

Theology of the Body for Teens Chapter 10, “Finding Your Vocation,” aims to show teens that there are two vocations acceptable to the Catholic community: marriage or celibacy for the Kingdom of God. Vocation is “the call that God gives to each of us, asking us to live for Him and love him in a particular way” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 162). If one does not feel inclined to marry, one must abstain from sexual pleasure. Here, the sexual expectations are clear, given that there are only two vocational options acceptable in the Catholic Church.

The notion of the vocation as a calling from God creates complicated implications for agency. TOB for Teens Chapter 9, “Celibacy and Religious Life,” defines vocation as a divine call from God, “not merely a ‘choice’ by an individual” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 144). This distinction implies that individuals do not know their purposes in life and that they have their life paths chosen for them by God as opposed to choosing for themselves. Thus, the Church
encourages people to minimize their individual senses of agency in exchange for vocational calling from God.

TOB for Teens frames celibacy in the same terms as marriage: union with God in heaven. Since union with God is the ultimate purpose of our lives, the Church views forgoing earthly marriage to devote oneself entirely to the heavenly marriage – to be celibate – in a positive light. Thus, celibacy still fulfills the nuptial meaning of the body by “embracing a life signifying the heavenly marriage between Christ and his Church” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 144). Pope John Paul II interprets the meaning of the two vocations, marriage and celibacy, somehow through sex differentiation. He says that marriage and celibacy are not opposed to each other but are complementary. “Both furnish a full answer to one of man’s fundamental questions, the questions about the significance of ‘being a body,’ that is, about the significance of masculinity and femininity, of being ‘in the body’ a man or a woman” (TOB, July 14, 1982). Experiencing life in the body as a man or woman frames gender as opposites, not acknowledging the ways that they are alike. This limited gender binary furthers narrow gender roles in the Catholic faith.

Part of living a celibate lifestyle is practicing continence, and TOB for Teens teaches that sexual continence is a way to experience communion with God. Continence is the “maintaining control of one’s desires, appetites, and passions rather than being controlled by them” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 146). This phrasing connects having desires with danger; in that, the individual might lose her free will if her desires are not regulated. Lived continence as a form of self-control is highly valued in the Catholic tradition. The textbook urges students to, instead of giving in to sexual temptation, direct their passions toward, “the true, good, and beautiful” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 146). If one’s desires are to be regulated and free will restricted, it would make sense that these lessons would have a restricting effect on students’ senses of
sexual agency. At the same time, Theology of the Body frames continence, or the regulation of sexual desire, as the liberation of the individual from temptation, which may give the individual more control over his or her actions.

Theology of the Body catechesis’s stance on birth control and appropriate sexual acts within marriage are based on *Humanae Vitae*, a document fully dedicated to Catholic sexual guidelines. *TOB for Teens* Chapter 8, “Marriage,” sets up expectations for students that are consistent with *Humanae Vitae*’s teachings about contraception. Natural Family Planning, as defined by *TOB for Teens*, is the “various modern, effective, and moral methods of achieving or postponing pregnancy based on the daily recording of the observable signs of fertility and infertility occurring in every healthy woman” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 128). The textbook teaches that NFP is an acceptable form of contraceptive that, “when practiced properly, actually enhances all four marks of marital love [free, total, faithful, fruitful]” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 129). Although NFP is acceptable, the *Theology of the Body for Teens* textbook reminds us that contraception is always an obstacle to authentic marital love.

*Humanae Vitae*, written by Pope Paul VI, focuses on the moment in which spouses become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). *Humanae Vitae* 11 states that in any marriage, there must be no impairment to procreation, and *Humanae Vitae* 12 states that “there is an inseparable connection established by God between the unitive and procreative meanings inherent to the marriage act” (Landry 2003, 29). *Humanae Vitae* 12 reiterates the widely accepted Catholic conviction that sexual intercourse should be reserved only for the context of marriage. *Humanae Vitae* is most famous for distinguishing between morally licit and illicit regulations of fertility. The text states as morally illicit, “any action, which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation” (*Humanae Vitae* 14). Morally illicit acts, in this
case, includes abortion, direct sterilization, and any other form of artificial contraceptive. It is morally licit to take advantage of infertile periods if there are “reasonable grounds for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological conditions of husband or wife or from external circumstances” (*Humanae Vitae* 16). The reason that the Natural Family Planning (NFP) method of contraceptive is allowed, while other forms of contraception are not, *Humanae Vitae* argues, is because periodic continence uses facilities of nature, while contraception obstructs nature.

In his analysis of *Humanae Vitae*, Fr. Landry posits that there “cannot be a contradiction between the divine laws pertaining to the transmission of life and those fostering authentic conjugal love” (Landry 2003, 30). Thus, the purpose of sexual intercourse is reproduction, which is God’s will. The interpersonal dimension of Catholic sexual script neglects to address sexual pleasure as a part of sexual relations and sets the expectation that one must plan to have children if one engages in sexual activity. Simultaneously, the emphasis on reproduction ascribes power to women, in that, they are the ones that have the ability, or agency, to procreate.

**Conclusion**

Interpretation of the Bible has provided much rich content for sexuality curriculums, with mixed messages about womanhood, female sexuality, and agency. The Creation Story emphasizes man’s original state of solitude and, once Eve appears, unity and innocence. While this story portrays Eve as innocent and pure, she also paradoxically displays a significant amount of power and agency. Eve, as the mother of all the living, ascribes the role of motherhood with great responsibility and power. Monogamy and purity of heart are held up as ideals in the Catholic faith, against concupiscence, which produces objectification and shame. Purity of heart
is framed as a protective measure for women, assuming that men inherently possess sexual desire and that women are inherently the objects of such desire.

Although Eve’s role frames motherhood as a woman’s sole purpose, providing a sexual script for women in the Catholic faith, Eve demonstrates resistance against these norms. When Eve takes the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, marking the advent of Original Sin, she demonstrates her agency in exercising free will and resisting God’s Plan. However, this resistance ultimately ends in vastly dark consequences, not only for Adam and Eve but for all humanity, discouraging resistance from Catholic expectations. Pope John Paul II frames shame as the inevitable result of a certain kind of “nakedness,” the nakedness that “makes woman an object for man.” In this philosophy, women somehow become responsible for men’s impure or sexually gratifying gaze.

While Eve’s story demonstrates her power and resistance, the Catholic Church expects women to be like the Virgin Mary, the ideal pedestal of femininity, obedience, and motherhood. Just as Mother Mary accepted the Holy Spirit to come down upon her to impregnate her, the Catholic woman must treat her body as a “temple” of the Holy Spirit. Sex is thus, linked to faith and God. The divine call to marriage is the nuptial or spousal meaning of the body. Thus, the meaning of the body manifests in the sacrament of marriage and children. This makes contraception an “evil” act since it blocks what is “natural.” Marriage is considered a vocation or a calling from God. If one is not married, one must be celibate.

*Theology of the Body for Teens* teaches that to live out the values of free, total, faithful, and fruitful love is to find the key to happiness. *TOB for Teens* aims to teach students these values so they can live holy lives in communion with God. Chapter 12, “Living the Good (and Free!) Life,” says, “the path to happiness and holiness in life is to learn to speak the language of
the body as God intended: freely, totally, faithfully, and fruitfully” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 189). Paradoxically, the TOB for Teens curriculum uses the word “free” to describe a set of strict sexual guidelines all Catholic women must follow. Instead of drawing on the strength of Eve’s resistance by taking from the Tree of Knowledge, the curriculum seems to draw on the negative consequences of such resistance, encouraging women to strive for innocence and obedience. Thus, the curriculum sends the message to students that in order to be happy, they must avoid lust, temptation, and sin.

TOB for Teens is part of a movement called new evangelization. New Evangelization is “the special need to share the Gospel with new enthusiasm, new methods, and new expressions. The new evangelization is not a new Gospel, but it recognizes that as the world changes, the methods for sharing the Good News need to change if they are to be effective” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 190). TOB for Teens prides itself on using language and tone that are more effective with students and thus can reach students and change their behavior. Nonetheless, my findings through interviews suggest, contrarily, that students neither entirely accepted nor conformed to the TOB for Teens content.

In the next chapter, I will explain how students reacted to receiving the Theology of the Body for Teens lesson plans, including the videos and assignments.
Chapter 2. Navigating the Curriculum

The sexual education that my classmates and I received at Saint Margaret’s was composed of various class assignments in our yearly, mandatory “religion class,” spanning from the years 2012 to 2016. Rather than teaching one sexual education class, Saint Margaret’s folded morality-based sexual education into the mandatory religion classes. The school posed sexual education as sections of our religion classes. Our most notable projects were a semester-long baby project, in which we had to carry around flour sack babies and write daily diaries about our flour sack babies’ daily activities, and a marriage project, in which we had to describe in detail what our ideal marriage would be like, create expense sheets for our future weddings, and describe our plans for having children. Most of my conversations with interlocutors in this chapter revolve around *Theology of the Body for Teens* because of how time-consuming those projects were in comparison to other sexual ed-related assignments.

While the theology curriculum might appear to be out of sync with contemporary trends in American sexual education, clergy and Catholic educators developing the sexual education curriculums and assignments sought to be faithful to their beliefs in an increasingly secular world. But ill will or not, these morality-based lessons ultimately ended up not reaching students as planned. Regardless of student background, the entire curriculum proved ineffective. Students interpreted the *TOB for Teens* video lessons to be slut-shaming, the marriage project as useless and heteronormative, and the baby project as placing too much responsibility on solely the woman. The way that students reflect back on these assignments, furthermore, paints a more complicated picture of their processes of sexual learning and individual senses of agency. Chapter Two will focus on how Saint Margaret’s high school students, regardless of religious
background, interpreted pieces of the *Theology of the Body for Teens* curriculum, such as the video lessons, the marriage project, and the flour-sack-baby daily diaries project – not as positive and enriching experiences but, paradoxically, as primarily about shame, danger, and responsibility.

*Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* by Carole Vance (1984) explains that discourse on female sexuality that largely focuses on danger and risk victimizes women and ignores female sexual agency. Vance studied the increasingly restrictive discussions surrounding sex and the narrowing of possibilities for women’s sexual exploration that marked the early 80’s, as sexual and social conservatism in the United States began to grow (1984). She argued that the discursive environment surrounding pleasure and danger can serve as a contradicting, powerful force in women’s sexual development. Intentions aside, discourse centered on danger increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live. My findings contribute that the Catholic teachings on sex and sexuality do not convince young women to wait to engage in sexual intercourse; rather, the students experience more shame regarding their sexual desires.

The shame surrounding sexual desire comes from the discursive creation of sexual taboo, or a hierarchy of sexual acts and fantasies. Gayle Rubin’s renowned article, “Thinking Sex” (1984),\(^\text{13}\) illustrates a diagram (see Figure 2) that outlines the conservative hierarchical valuation of sex acts (e.g., heteronormative, no toys, monogamous, in the context of marriage, for reproduction) in Western practice. The socially accepted acts are in the middle of the circle, while acts that are not widely accepted in Western society are placed at the outer limits. This type of hierarchy divides sexual practices and desires into two categories: good and bad. Rubin argues that the role of sexuality becomes a political power tool that can be used to repress

nonconforming groups of people. The curriculum explicitly establishes a sexual hierarchy along these lines and convinces students that specific types of sexual relations and desires are inherently wrong.

Figure 2. The charmed circle

This chapter will introduce four Saint Margaret’s alumnae, Jennifer, Amber, Crystal, and Katherine, who graciously and eagerly agreed to contribute to this project. There are key

differences between these interlocutors in their socioeconomic backgrounds, races, religions, and
genral ideologies.

**Introducing the Saint Margaret’s Alumnae**

My first question to fellow peers asked broadly whether or not they felt we received
sexual education. Although the question of whether or not we received sex ed seems
straightforward, I found two types of responses. One was that our Catholic school taught us
nothing – the perception that our Catholic school lacked formal sexual education. The second
perception is that our “incomplete” sexual education acts as its own mode of sexual education. In
other words, the strategic omission of information is itself a form of sexual education, at the
least, in that it pushes students elsewhere to gain sexual information. While the next chapters
address informal modes of gaining sexual education, such as exploring the internet and testing
the limitations of school policies, this chapter will focus on the formal, in-class curriculum at
Saint Margaret’s.

Regarding Saint Margaret’s abstinence-only curriculum at large, the first response I
received from my interlocutors expressed the feeling that we did not receive sexual education at
all. Jennifer was the first one of my high school friends that I decided to reach out to for my
project. Maybe it is because I know that our views are aligned on multiple levels, and we come
from similar backgrounds (i.e., at least one parent raised Catholic or Christian, multiracial,
upper-middle class, passionate about women’s rights, etc.), so conversations with her – even
conversations about sex – felt easier. Jennifer told me that we did not learn anything about the
“actual act of sex.” Furthermore, “there was no discussion of pleasure. It wasn’t integral to the
learning about abstinence, because obviously, you shouldn’t be having sexual pleasure if you’re abstinent.” Even in the context of marriage, Jennifer said our curriculum’s focus was “how sex can be done morally and how can it be done in a faithful, Catholic way? And how can it be done to have children. The focus was never on pleasure. It was always on morality.” Jennifer told me that she felt angry at the shaming and the guilting. The shaming and guilting Jennifer mentions are based on not only her individual observations of harmful interactions between teachers and students, but also the language of shame indirectly communicated to students via Saint Margaret’s curriculum, restrictive policies, and strict guidelines (more on class assignments in this chapter; more on policies in Chapter Three). “But I don’t think that’s the case for everyone, especially people who come from more conservative families, or just don’t necessarily have people they can talk to about sex.” Since Jennifer lived in a household with relatively liberal parents, she felt she could openly talk about sex in the household or at least explore the internet in her free time to learn more.

On the other hand, the perception that we did indeed receive sexual education exists. Jennifer says that *Theology of the Body for Teens* “had highly problematic and didn’t cover a lot of really important topics that as a young, sexually active person, you would want to know or need to know to be safe. And I think that was really the only sex ed we had.” I will use the rest of the chapters to identify how students can understand sex, given limited formal sexual education.

Amber, similarly, grew up with one Christian parent and one atheist parent and identifies as an atheist. Her views align with Jennifer’s on almost all fronts. While Jennifer and I are both hapa-haole (half white, half Asian), Amber is black. All of our families chose to send us to Saint Margaret’s due to affordability or scholarship money. Jennifer is straight, but Amber and I both
identify as bisexual. Amber, as opposed to Jennifer, believes that we did receive sexual education, but that the content was “problematic” and “wack.”

Crystal comes from a lower-middle class background with a single mother. Her mother raised her as a practicing Catholic. Crystal typifies her childhood as “super Catholic.” Crystal met her now-husband in November of 2018, then had a courthouse wedding three months later and moved in with him. She did not tell her mother until after the marriage was official. Her mother “was pissed but didn’t have the right to be pissed since she had a courthouse wedding too.” While Jennifer and Amber are projected to complete their bachelors’ degrees in a few months, Crystal decided not to pursue a college education and now works as a house cleaner. She would like to have a baby next year. Crystal grew distant from Catholicism over the years and is a self-proclaimed atheist.

Katherine grew up in a practicing Catholic family and is still a practicing Catholic herself. She does not remember much about our sexual education or theology classes. She posits that this is because she learned about Catholic values first from her family and in a way that made more sense to her. I will speak more to how she – and my other informants – learned about sex from her family in a later chapter. She is finishing her bachelor’s degree and was very excited about being a part of my research.

Teaching Danger: The Theology of the Body for Teens Video Lessons

The authors of the Theology of the Body for Teens curriculum, Brian Butler, Jason Evert, and Crystalina Evert, explain why children and teenagers need a Catholic morality-based education program. The motivation for abstinence-only education that they draw on is the
perceived dangers and risks – spiritual, physical, emotional, or otherwise – associated with the increasingly sex-positive world. The authors created it to combat dangers related to sex and sexuality that the authors observed in the secular world. “If sex is on their minds, put truth in their hearts” in large lettering begins the *Theology of the Body for Teens* introduction video. I vividly remember viewing across the classroom projection screen, *Theology of the Body for Teens: Discovering God’s Plan for Love and Life* pops up. Jason, Brian, and Crystalina, the *TOB for Teens* course creators, then introduce themselves and share some highlights from a collection of the video lessons. As Jason explains that the world’s younger generation is “ready for a new sexual revolution,” the screen flashes red, the color of blood. Then, with another flashing of red, Brian mentions the high divorce rate. Crystalina concludes the introduction by saying, Theology of the Body will “lead us to the truth in clarity instead of confusion.” The *Theology of the Body for Teens* textbook introduction features multiple jarring “Did You Know” statements including:

- “The U.S. actually has the highest divorce rate in the Western world.”
- “One in three girls is sexually abused by the time she is eighteen years old.”
- “About 40 percent of all children in the U.S. will live with their single mother and her boyfriend at some point before their 16th birthday.”
- “Every day, 8,000 teenagers in the U.S. become infected with an STD” (Butler, Evert, and Evert 2006, 3).

Butler explains that *TOB for Teens* is useful for teenagers because it uses language that is familiar to them so teenagers can better learn what moral paths are suitable for them. The video lessons, workbook, and lessons include stories, discussion questions, and “quotes of wisdom” from saints and John Paul II. Butler says, “we use the language of the culture and what teens
know to help them.” He envisions *TOB for Teens* as a multidimensional tool better positioned to reach teenagers than the average school, parish, or church. Brian emphasizes that the *TOB for Teens* lessons can help teenagers “learn the way that’s best for them.” This statement reveals the underlying assumption that teenagers do not already know what is best for them and that they need help, specifically from Catholic experts.

**Student Responses to the Theology of the Body for Teens Videos**

Through interviews with Saint Margaret’s graduates, I found that the *TOB for Teens* material did not reach students as school administrators may have hoped. Instead, my fellow graduates discussed experiencing shame inside the classroom, specifically during the *TOB for Teens* video lessons. Here, I highlight how a few students with vastly different backgrounds – myself included – reflect on their experience with the *TOB for Teens* curriculum.

Jennifer’s interpretation is that these video lessons encouraged students to participate in slut-shaming. She recalls, “The whole focus of their marriage story was, Jason is such a good guy for getting together with Christina because she was sullied because she slept around so much. Now, of course, that she’s turned back to God and tried to repent for her sinful activities, she’s okay now, and now things are fine because she’s married. That whole story is just the biggest slut-shame that this school could have possibly thrown at us.” Jennifer also mentions that she knew multiple students in the class who had already had sex and that the lessons served to “stigmatize having sex outside of marriage.” Instead of receiving the *TOB for Teens* lesson plans

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16 Ibid.
as educational or informative, Jennifer thought the lessons were “really preachy and judgmental” and that the “ideas of inclusiveness that they were trying to bring in and their attempts to reach out to this younger audience just really didn’t work.” My conversation with Jennifer highlights the ineffectiveness of the video lessons, as they did not reach students the way the creators of the curriculum would have wanted. That the *TOB for Teens* authors prided themselves on utilizing the ‘language of the culture’ and yet, students hardly remember the lessons, reveals a significant cultural and possibly generational disconnect.

Jennifer acknowledges that *TOB for Teens* mentioned sex and sexuality, but in ways that she thought were harmful to women. She says, “there were two things I was thinking about: Sex is only okay in the context of marriage, and in the context of creating children.” She goes on to explain her visceral reaction to *TOB for Teens*’ framing of women, having women’s sexuality “reduced to being with a man and being with child.” All of these restrictive, androcentric messages about female sexuality, she says, “left a really bad taste in [her] mouth.”

After watching these videos in class, Amber felt disturbed by the implicit shaming. Amber mocks the dialogue that she remembers from the *TOB for Teens* video lessons. Mocking Jason, she says, “Christa had sex like before we were married! Christa was a floozy before we met, but it's okay because I love her now that she's dedicated herself to me.” Imitating Crystalina, she says, “I gave away my body to other people before, and I regret it! But now, I know. And you can avoid the mistakes I made, and you cannot give your body away to whoever, and you can save it for your forever person.” Amber agrees with Jennifer on the slut-shaming effects of the video lessons, which is not shocking.

The heteronormative, “slut-shaming” kind of language that Jennifer and Amber touch on represent how the Catholic Church creates a binary of inclusion and exclusion. Mary Douglas, in
*Purity and Danger*, argues that the concepts of dirt, pollution, and taboo, are strategically used to maintain social order, and in most cases, hierarchies of power (2002). In the case of Saint Margaret’s, one can be ostracized from the social body if one chooses to participate in nonconforming behavior, or behavior that defies Catholic sexual standards. The apparent lesson students learned is that to be accepted into the Catholic community, one must follow the Catholic guidelines on purity.

Not only were non-Catholic students at Saint Margaret’s responding negatively to the TOB for Teens curriculum but also, Catholic students found the content to be exclusive and redundant. Another one my interlocutors, Crystal, grew up Catholic, but still echoes Jennifer’s sentiment that the curriculum was not inclusive. Crystal told me what she remembered from the TOB for Teens video lessons and comments on the heteronormativity of all of it. She says, what she took from the curriculum was, “the whole ‘sex is a sacred thing’ and you know, it's supposed to be between a man and a woman who love each other and are married, that sort of thing.” Crystal’s jaded attitude toward the exclusive nature of our sexual education just makes up one reason for her denouncement of the lessons we received.

Crystal’s comments about exclusivity speak to the “outer limits” of Gayle Rubin’s charmed circle (1984). The lessons Crystal and other students took away from the TOB for Teens lessons almost exactly mirror the hierarchy of values Western society has attributed to various sex acts. Although Gayle Rubin’s charmed circle was published three and a half decades ago, the relic of old ideas about sex are still ever-present in the Catholic Church, with married heterosexual sex deemed acceptable, and any other form of sexual gratification deemed sinful. If sex is a “sacred thing” when practiced within the confines of the charmed circle, sex is a sinful thing when practiced in the outer limits.
Crystal also mentions that she paid little attention to the theology lessons due to the explicit “religiousness” of it. Crystal comments on how the curriculum’s religiosity prevented her from fully accepting any of the material at all. She said, “I didn't take it seriously because there was so much religion involved. I know it was a Catholic school. However, we didn't really have much of a choice.” Crystal’s jaded attitude toward Catholicism pushed her from embracing the theology courses at Saint Margaret’s. “So everything that was kind of religious in general, I felt like it was shoved down my throat. Therefore, I wanted to just spit it back out and not take it to heart.” Crystal is not the only student that felt uncomfortable during theology classes. Crystal, among other students, had been exposed to Catholic values her whole life and found the TOB for Teens video lessons to be redundant.

Katherine also grew up learning about Catholic values and the meaning of human sexuality in the Catholic Church. She found the Theology of the Body for Teens curriculum ineffective for several reasons. Firstly, Katherine, like Crystal, had already been exposed to the Catholic values TOB for Teens presented. She mentions that she was raised in a “faith framework,” which helped her better understand the content. She also acknowledged that someone without that kind of background might have a hard time accepting or understanding. “The classroom experience was not super impactful for me and maybe that's because I had already heard some of it from my parents and had conversations about that with my parents. Honestly, the class wasn't super memorable.” Not many students felt engaged in class. Katherine says, “I remember we watched the videos and then would have a conversation and Sister Adna would ask us questions and not many people would answer.”

Another reason Katherine found the course to be ineffective was the hypocritical nature of having nuns teach a sex education class. Regarding the TOB for Teens videos and coursework,
she says, “it was kind of funny that a nun was teaching us. I think it would be better if a person who was in a relationship or married taught it.” The value of Katherine’s sexual education from her parents, in part, is due to the fact that they had experienced relationships. I speak more to this in a later chapter. “That was one of the problems that I had with Theology of the Body at school, that I was taught by nuns who are not or have not experienced being in a sexually active relationship. I think the words and the concepts can have a lot more weight if they were taught by someone who is actually practicing that in their relationship.” The inadequacies of formal sexual education at this all-girls Catholic school highlight the need for students have supportive environments at home and trusted adults with whom they can open conversations about sex.

Lastly, Katherine was put off by the harshness of the message as it was presented at school. Though Katherine had learned about the importance of abstinence and chastity at home, the conversations about sex at home comforted her. Conversely, the message as it was delivered at Saint Margaret’s spread fear among students. “With the sisters or Sister Adna, the message was a little firmer, and fear is a really strong word but I... I don't know how to word it. With the sisters, it was more like, 'you need to do this; this is the way' and there's not so much wiggle room if you mess up.” The way students responded to the TOB for Teens curriculum – even Catholic students – is imbued with fear and shame. She said when she learned about sex from her parents, “there was a difference: 'sex is a good thing. It's not something to be ashamed of. It's part of who you are. But at the same time, you can only fully experience that when you give yourself to someone in a whole and total way.' So for Theology of the Body and for me, that would be in the context of a committed relationship, in the context of marriage.” Katherine’s language of giving oneself to another in sexual intercourse closely parallels the interdependent model of sexual behavior put forth by the Theology of the Body for Teens creators. Although
Katherine may have disagreed with how the material was taught in theology class, the concepts stayed with her.

These conversations highlight the ways in which the *TOB for Teens* material did not reach students as school administrators may have hoped. Jennifer, Amber, and Crystal touched on problematic content from the *TOB for Teens* video lessons that did not encourage them to live the chaste life the Catholic Church espouses. Contrarily, they were put off by the whole thing. Meanwhile, Katherine found the curriculum to be boring since she had heard about some of the concepts before in the context of her home and family life. Thus, she felt relatively unengaged and found the content to be corny and the messaging to be too harsh.

The graduates noticed what seemed to them as an unequal gender dynamic of power and responsibility. Looking through my own responses to *TOB for Teens* assignments, I find that my work echoes the comments of St. Margaret’s alumnae. I recovered a final paper reflecting on the values of John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, turned in on May 20, 2013, the end of our first year of high school. The paper confirms critical messages from what we learned – including messages about gender, purpose, and responsibility – is highlighted by this small section:

> As teenagers, we should live lives of purpose and purity. There are so many risks associated with being impure, like getting a sexually-transmitted disease, becoming pregnant when you're not ready, having an abusive or hurtful boyfriend, and losing all self-confidence and dignity. Teenagers who live a pure life of purpose will receive respect and become closer with God. We, as teenagers, are impulsive, and we don't know what's hurting us until it is too late. Theology of the Body tries to help us to make healthy decisions in our lives that we might not have otherwise known before. Everything we do should be a sign of Him [God] and a work of His will. If our bodies are actually meant for God, we have to remind ourselves that He is watching and working within us. Most girls my age wear provocative clothing and flirt with boys, not knowing that they are misusing their bodies.
Mary Douglas’s theories (2002) have suggested that notions of purity and impurity are bound up with the social body trying to police itself and are metaphors for a binary of inclusion and exclusion. This means that to become impure, or in the Catholic setting, to demonstrate or act on any form of sexual desire, is to put oneself at risk of being ejected from the social body. Purity, then, is not only mandated by the Catholic Church, but self-imposed as a form of protection from social ostracization.

It is clear to see the Catholic expectations for how women should be using their bodies, expectations that stuck with my interlocutors for years after we took these classes. This paper sets up a causal relationship between “being impure” and having an abusive boyfriend, implying that one leads to the other. This notion, again, shifts accountability and responsibility onto the victim and not on the abuser. The paper posits that a consequence of sexual behavior is the loss of self-confidence and dignity, rather than an enhancement of self-confidence. The messages in this paper mirror the messages idealizing purity in Theology of the Body. This also conveys the assumption that the female body has a purpose that is decided externally from the individual.

This paper includes the notion of Foucauldian surveillance (i.e., “God is watching us and working within us…”). Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977), explains how surveillance can be used to control behavior, and in the context of the panopticon, all prisoners behave as though they are being watched. Thus, the panopticon’s surveillant structure ensures that prisoners surveil themselves, allowing for complete order and obedience even without the presence of a prison guard. Surveillance becomes an important method the Catholic Church and Saint Margaret’s use to control student behavior. Even in the context of graded assignments, an assignment in theology class might push a student to agree with a Catholic idea on paper in an attempt to be a successful student. Grading in theology classes thus also becomes a form of
surveillance that both measures and enforces student conformity to Catholic expectations. Samples of my papers from high school can confirm the type of language that would score one an excellent grade in a theology class. The next chapter addresses school administrators’ surveillance and regulation of student behavior via school policies.

Another one of my papers from the same class comments on a story that we read in class called “A Deceptive Appetite,” meant to teach us the importance of self-control and the evil of sexual desire. The story details a fictional account of a wolf that is lured into a hunter’s trap, a knife coated in goat’s blood, then frozen. The scent of goat’s blood lures the wolf in. The wolf licks the blade until the goat’s blood is all gone and ends up consuming its own blood until it dies of blood loss.

Just like the “Story Starter: A Deceptive Appetite” from the Theology of the Body book, we need to learn self-control and how our bodies function. The trap for the wolves in that story represents lust in humans. At first, we don’t know that it’s a trap or that it will hurt us, and we only find out that something’s wrong until it is too late. Just like the wolf, we can be the cause of our own decline. This is why we must learn self-control and have a clearer understanding of what will be good for us and what will be bad.

This essay’s frightening imagery, as opposed to informing students about their bodies or sexualities, served to scare students from their own desires. One’s possessing of desire or sexual curiosity is equated with one’s “decline.” Sex is likened to death. This essay euphemistically claims that having sexual thoughts “will hurt us.” Anything related to sex becomes a violent, dangerous battlefield that only the God-fearing may navigate. Furthermore, the creature that desires sex is literally an animal, which may be implying that people who cannot suppress their sexualities are untamed or animalistic. The notion that Catholic experts know “what will be good for us and what will be bad” better than we know ourselves is ever present.
Student Reactions to the Marriage Project

The marriage project was one mandatory piece of the theology curriculum at Saint Margaret’s, in which students were required to think of an ideal wedding and create a connected Excel spreadsheet to document how expensive a wedding ceremony would be. Students interpreted the project as confusing and loaded with assumptions. It framed heteronormative marriage as necessary and regulated by the language of sin.

Rather than learning anything from the project, students found the content to be paradoxical and did not understand the purpose of the project. One of my interlocutors, Crystal explains the details of the project: “We had to price out everything, so like our dream wedding ceremony. We had to pick a venue, caterers, and we just basically had to price out everything down to like the bridesmaid’s dresses, like the groomsmen and everything like that.”

The marriage project operated under multiple assumptions: students had to be straight, looking to be married, and looking to raise children. Amber felt upset about the heteronormativity of the project and felt it was unnecessary. Earlier, students at Saint Margaret’s were required to do a similar project for death, in which we planned our funerals and created an expense sheet for burials and funeral ceremonies. Amber says, “The marriage project was the weirdest thing we had to do. I was like, you're operating under some weird assumptions. The death project was weird too! But you have to die, so I guess that makes more sense. You don't have to get married.”

Jennifer and Amber remembered that our teachers coupled the marriage project with lessons on the dangers of cohabitation. Jennifer mocks the teachers, saying, “Cohabitation ruins your life and is super sinful!” Amber felt that the rules regarding cohabitation are ironic: “You
don't want people to have sex. You want these people to get together, having never lived
together, having never slept together, like that's a recipe for disaster, dude! You gotta test the
product before you buy!” Amber also mentions that in a Catholic context, it would make more
sense to accept cohabitation with restraint, since cohabitation and abstinence together would be
the ultimate form of restraint.

When asked what she thought was the purpose of the marriage project, Crystal answered
that since an Excel sheet could show how much you spent on the wedding, you might be more
inclined to stay with your partner and not divorce. The way that Saint Margaret’s tried to teach
the financial aspect of weddings confused students. “I guess like [the marriage project] shows
you the financial aspect of planning such a big event. And like if you're in it, you're in it. That's
kind of what I took away from it. Like if we're going to spend like 50 Grand, you may as well
stay with the person.” Crystal interpreted the message to be a warning against divorce motivated
by the large expenses associated with weddings.

**Teaching Responsibility: The Flour Sack Baby Project**

In the students’ eyes, the flour sack baby project further stigmatized sex and pregnancy,
while painting an essentialistic picture of motherhood (i.e. women must be mothers, mothers
have the responsibility of raising children). The flour sack baby project was memorable for
students but did not leave them with lessons from the Catholic Church.

Katherine tells me about what she remembers from the flour sack baby project: “I
remember we all had to bring in a five-pound bag of rice or flour and we had to carry around for
a week. And then there were specific rules or expectations. So like if you couldn't leave it alone
from like I think you could ever leave it alone. Like you had to pay people or like arrange for people to watch it if you were not going to be present. You couldn't leave it in the car.”

Additionally, students were required to write daily diary entries, explaining their babies’ activities and the burdensome nature of motherhood. Both Catholic and non-Catholic students found this project to be meaningless.

Jennifer thought that the flour sack baby project was ridiculous, exclusive, and hypocritical due to Saint Margaret’s pregnant student policy. “Saint Margaret’s’ policy for if you actually get pregnant is you get expelled for a year and you can’t come back until after you’ve had your baby, so I thought it was really odd that you could have that kind of policy in place while also making girls of the same age do a project where you have them have a baby and pretend to be taking care of a child, while stigmatizing pregnancy so much for people who are actually going through it.” She also mentions that in the project, students had to have a baby father and could not envision having a female spouse or co-parent or any kind of alternative pregnancy options. It was explicitly mentioned that the “child” was conceived in wedlock. “I personally don’t want to have any children, so I found that project to be kind of uncomfortable to have to do in the first place.” She tries to understand what message the project was meant to send to students.

They were monitoring us so intensely – I know they threatened that if you left your baby in the hall or something and no one was watching it, they would take your baby and then you’d have to write a paper about the experience of losing your child, and I don’t know! I thought that all of that was really pointless and that there were a lot more conducive ways to teach whatever lesson they were trying to get across. I still don’t quite know what message they were trying to teach us. I don’t know if it was supposed to be: here’s the burden of a child, now deal with it and then, let this inform your decision of how critical and how very intensive an experience having a child is supposed to be, or what.

The “monitoring” of students is one example of ways that the faculty regulated student behavior to fit within Catholic guidelines via Foucauldian surveillance. Since inappropriate student
conduct could be met with grade penalties or other repercussive actions, students underwent the process of learning Catholic ideals of purity and simultaneously, the dangers of resisting the Catholic sexual script. I will further discuss the topic of surveillance in the next chapter alongside descriptions of interactions between students and the administration.

Meanwhile, Amber felt upset that our brother school’s curriculum did not include a similar project and that if a Saint Margaret’s student did get pregnant, there would be no acceptable options in the eyes of the Church besides raising the child. “Our school was basically like, no abortion. No condoms. If you get pregnant, you have to have the baby.” Our school’s expectations for students in this regard narrowed gender roles for Catholic women and thus taught students a limited view of womanhood.

Katherine explains what it was like to bring the fake flour sack baby from place to place, and she wonders aloud about the purpose of the baby project:

I vividly remember one time. I was going to the store like going to hang out with my friends and I left it at home, and we were living with my grandparents at the time. And it had been three hours or something since I left, and I was like, ‘Oh shoot! I left it there!’ And I was like, I felt very convinced that I can't just leave it there. I'm not going to tell the teachers that I left it, but I also shouldn't just leave it alone. I called my grandma who was home, and I said, ‘can you just bring it into the room that you're in with you?’ and she did. But there were multiple other times, like I left it in the car once, and I had a reusable shopping bag and I carried it around not at school. The purpose was to make students aware that if you have a child, this is the amount of attention that you have to give to it. You would have to be always caring for it and bringing it everywhere. You can't be leaving it alone or else it's going to die! I don't know if it's before our time, but they used to have to bring eggs so that it would be fragile, I guess, which I think is gross and ridiculous.

While some students – namely Amber, Jennifer, and me – completed assignments for our theology classes primarily on the grounds of obligation and academic success, other students’ completion of morality-based assignments went beyond performativity and grades. Katherine’s
feeling that she could not leave her “child” alone makes me wonder the extent to which students internalized the messaging that teachers and the theology curriculums provided.

Below is an excerpt from my flour sack baby daily diaries from my theology class freshman year:

2/28/13
Ivy Jr. was born today at 10:38 am. It has been a very busy day for both of us. It is very hard to hold my books and a big basket with a baby in it all at once, especially since I got my baby an exceptionally big basket. A lot of my friends in other grade levels have seen my baby and think she’s cute. I really hope that I can remember to take good care of my baby until Tuesday.

3/01/13
Ivy Jr. proved to be very heavy today. When I was walking up the stairs, her new basket broke. She is fine, but I have to get a new basket for her tonight. I feel I have done a fine job at motherhood for now, but I still just need to get used to bringing my baby everywhere I go. In the hallways between classes, people stare at Ivy Jr. and she likes the attention. I wish that my next carrier for Ivy Jr. will not break since she is a fat baby.

3/02/13
Today was a fun day with Ivy Jr. We mostly spent the day indoors and we were very lazy. It was easier to take care of Ivy Jr. today, probably because it’s the weekend. During school days, I always have to remember to bring her with me, but since I stayed home today, I didn’t have to take her from class to class.

3/03/13
Again, today was an easy day for taking care of my baby. Most of the day, I was at my grandma’s house, helping her pack her things to move to her new nursing home. Since Ivy Jr. practically stayed in one spot the entire day, it was easier to manage her. My baby cries a lot these days though. She cries whenever her diaper needs to be changed and whenever she gets hungry.

3/04/13
Today, my baby used its third basket of the week. The first basket collapsed, and the second basket’s handle broke. I’m glad that my baby survived all those broken baskets and lived to tell the tale, but I’m hoping I can get her to school safely tomorrow. I will miss Ivy Jr., but my textbooks will seem a lot lighter when I finally turn her in. Motherhood was fun while it lasted, but I can use some more time to myself.
In this excerpt from my baby daily diaries, I personified the flour sack baby with phrases such as “we were very lazy” and “she gets hungry.” These personifications of the flour sack prompt questions about the purpose of the exercise, specifically if the purpose of the project was to whet the students’ appetites for motherhood. This personification also begs the question of the extent to which I internalized the messaging from the flour sack baby project. Yet, it seems that rather than encouraging me to have children, the project emphasized to me the potential burden of motherhood.

Conclusion

By reaching back into my old assignments and diaries, I am reconstituting the past, the experience of attending the all-girls Catholic school. Simultaneously, I have the privilege now of having a newer perspective and the added lens of anthropology. Through interviews, I have asked my interlocutors to join me in reaching back into the past and recreating the experience at Saint Margaret’s. Have their responses changed over time? What has time’s role been in how alumnae look back at their time at school? I attempt to answer some of these questions in the next chapter.

Although the authors of the *Theology of the Body for Teens* curriculum created it to combat dangers related to sex and sexuality that the authors observed in the secular world, I found that the *TOB for Teens* material did not reach students as school administrators may have hoped. Instead, my fellow graduates discussed experiencing shame inside the classroom, specifically during the *TOB for Teens* video lessons. Jennifer and Amber believed *TOB for Teens*
mentioned sex and sexuality in ways that are harmful to women. Not only did non-Catholic students at Saint Margaret’s respond negatively to the TOB curriculum, but Catholic students also found the content to be exclusive and redundant, using purity as a measurement of conformity to Catholic ideals. Paradoxically, the curriculum’s religiosity prevented Crystal from fully accepting any of the material. Like Crystal, Katherine found the course ineffective due to the hypocritical nature of having nuns teach a sex education class. Jennifer, Amber, and Crystal touched on problematic content from the TOB for Teens video lessons that did not encourage them to live out the Catholic values of chastity and abstinence. Contrarily, they were put off by the whole thing. Meanwhile, Katherine found the curriculum to be boring since she had heard about some of the concepts before in the context of her home and family life. Thus, the TOB for Teens curriculum was ineffective at engaging students.

The graduates noticed what seemed to them as an unequal gender dynamic of power and responsibility. As testimonial to the kinds of assumptions embedded in the TOB for Teens activities, the excerpt from my paper on purpose and purity shifts accountability and responsibility onto the victim and not onto the abuser. The paper poses the loss of self-confidence and dignity as a consequence of sexual behavior. These messages reveal the assumption that the woman’s body has a purpose that is decided externally from the individual. At the same time, if a woman decides to participate in “impure” behavior, she will be subject to ostracization and ridicule.

Both the marriage project and flour sack baby project were tinged with essentialist assumptions about gender and sexuality. The marriage project was one mandatory piece of the theology curriculum at Saint Margaret’s that students later interpreted as framing heteronormative marriage as necessary and regulated by the language of sin. The way that Saint
Margaret’s tried to engage students in thinking about weddings and marriage, rather than giving students more clarity about their future lifestyle choices, left students feeling confused. The flour sack baby project was memorable for students but did not leave them with lessons from the Catholic Church. Instead, in the students’ eyes, it further stigmatized sex and pregnancy, while painting an essentialist picture of motherhood (i.e., women must be mothers, and mothers have the responsibility of raising children).

The manner in which the Saint Margaret’s graduates reflected back on their experiences with the theology curriculum highlights a crucial discrepancy between their public and private behaviors and beliefs. For instance, Amber and Jennifer mock the *Theology of the Body for Teens* video lessons with the understanding that those sentiments would be met with administrative punishments if voiced publicly. Similarly, Katherine’s anecdote about accidentally leaving her flour sack baby at home and deciding not to tell her teachers is one instance in which there are distinct differences between Catholic school students’ private and public (i.e., exposed in the context of Catholic school) lives. The language that Katherine uses to describe the conditions for the flour sack baby project – “gross” and “ridiculous” – are terms that she would not necessarily use in front of Saint Margaret’s teachers and administrators, which points to the use of what James Scott calls “hidden transcripts.”

Like Scott’s interlocutors, Saint Margaret’s students’ use of hidden transcripts served as symbolic resistance that could be used without negative repercussions, “disguised, muted, and veiled for safety’s sake” (Scott 1990b, 137). In this case, the negative repercussions to be avoided could be grade penalties, social ostracization, or even suspension from school in some cases. Thus, there are many reasons why Saint Margaret’s students might turn to hidden transcripts in lieu of displaying open signs of rebellion. Small-scale acts of rebellion, such as
gossip, then, become a democratic voice “in conditions where power and possible repression make open acts of disrespect dangerous” (Scott 1985, 282). Within my model of agency (see Figure 1), the use of hidden transcripts can be considered implicit resistance since it is neither explicit resistance nor explicit compliance to the Catholic school guidelines.

That students made use of hidden transcripts, during their time at Saint Margaret’s or after, speaks to the complicated nature of how students interpret and digest their sexual education. The way that students utilize hidden transcripts will reveal more about their agency than studying only their public actions. Although they may act in conformity while on the schoolgrounds, their hidden transcripts and private grievances indicate that the students really are not as compliant as they seem in public settings.

The next chapter will discuss agency, conformity, and resistance in the context of school policies and regulations to which students were subject, and how these policies became a form of informal sexual education.
Chapter 3. Negotiating School Regulations and Policies

The previous chapter depicted sexual learning taking place in the traditional classroom setting through the *Theology of the Body for Teens* and a formal curriculum. However, students learned more about sexuality-related norms outside of the classroom. School policies, such as the policy for pregnant students, the uniform, prom, and the administration’s handling of an outwardly gay student couple, became significant aspects of students’ sexual learning. Thus, the interaction between school administration and students formed a mode of sexual education. Some students ultimately found the school regulations to be outdated and harsh, which pushed them to consume sexual content outside of the school context privately. This chapter explores the negotiation and resistance of students at St. Margaret’s as they digested information about sex and sexuality outside the confines of the classroom and the Catholic curriculum. These outdated regulations and harsh surveillance pushed them to utilize established aspects of school structures in taboo ways outside of the classroom context.

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), explains how the modern state attempts to control its citizens through psychological means – such as surveillance – rather than physical means. Surveillance asserts its power over students at Saint Margaret’s in the form of ‘God is always watching.’ Foucault argues that the awareness of being observed stifles individuality and ensures conformity of expectations. In the all-girls Catholic school context, the notion of administrator surveillance stifled students’ senses of agency, especially as it pertained to conversations about sex. Nevertheless, students rebelled in relatively minuscule ways against the school’s policies and regulations. The type of agency that Mahmood has used to discuss her
respondents describes actions that outwardly conform to societal expectations while reflecting genuine inner attachments to the social fabric. In other words, Mahmood has labeled conformant behavior as agentic; her respondents actively and willfully choose to participate in socially accepted practice and thus exercise their agency in doing so. While my interlocutors similarly justify their participation in traditional Catholic activities, such as the theology class assignments, their behavior goes beyond Mahmood’s definition of agency. Saint Margaret’s students deviate from Catholic guidelines in both implicit and explicit ways, within the school’s constraints (sometimes literally on the schoolgrounds) and outside of the school’s constraints in private settings.

Classifying acts – such as whispering about sex, making small changes to the school uniform, and reading erotic fiction – as rebellion or resistance points to a dynamic of power in Saint Margaret’s, in which students are warned against such behavior. Foucault says: “where there is power, there is resistance” (1977, 95). Saint Margaret’s teachers and administrators fostered a surveillant environment to discourage students from openly discussing the topic of sex or pleasure or participating in other “deviant” behavior.

In the time before the eighteenth century, public execution, torture, and punishment were part of most criminal investigations. In these types of rituals, the audience was necessary, as the public punishment helped to establish the governing body’s authority and power. In the eighteenth century, people in power reformed punishment, not out of consideration for prisoners, but to increase efficiency. The shift toward acceptance of the prison industrial complex started with the development of disciplines in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Discipline is a series of techniques that control an individual’s movements and experience of space and time, with military drills as one example. Disciplinary power involves hierarchical observation,
normalizing judgment, and examination. These processes contribute to form the notion of normality. The same strategies of power that control the delinquent control the citizen and thus lead to conformity and ‘normality.’

Bentham’s Panopticon is an example of hierarchical observation as a means of efficient control over a group of people. All prisoners feel as though they might be under the guard’s gaze at any moment and thus behave accordingly due to the watchtower’s central location in the panopticon. There need not be any guards in the watchtower for it to control the prisoners’ behavior. Observation is a vital instrument of power.

Foucault’s theory of power and control within carceral institutions applies to the world at large. Foucault (1977, 228) asks the readers, in *Discipline and Punish*, “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” The mechanisms of examination, classification, and regulation operate within all of these institutions. Prison resembles schools, for instance, not only because they have similar architecture, but also because they fulfill similar functions. In the Catholic school context, identical to the prison context, the body is not tortured but regulated, supervised, and examined. The aim of the penal process in premodern society was the effect on the body. Now, however, the overall objective in prisons and schools is the effect on the soul.

Lila Abu-Lughod adds to Foucault’s argument and analyzes resistance as a symptom and diagnostic of power. Foucault, quoted by Abu Lughod: “Resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault 1978, 95). Resistance and power are interconnected, codependent. How students feel about their resistance is reflective of the power structures that be. Abu-Lughod interprets Foucault and adds to his theories by arguing that scholars should view resistance as a symptom of power, as an effect of power structures. If resistance is a symptom
and consequence of power, then scholars can use or study resistance as a way to analyze and understand power. Since people resist something, resistance points to power. Thus, we can examine people’s forms of resistance as a way to illuminate the power people wish to resist. In this chapter, I consider how the different forms of student rebellion point toward the power structures against which the rebellion works. I illustrate that the rebellion occurs not only against power but within the preexisting structures of power, which, then, the acts of resistance help us understand. Thus, resistance is a diagnostic of power.

In her paper, *The Romance of Resistance: tracing transformation of power through Bedouin Women* (1990), Lila Abu-Lughod argues that within academia, there has been a tendency to romanticize resistance. Instead, we should analyze resistance as a “diagnostic of power” (Abu-Lughod 1990, 41), a symptom or characteristic of power, that we can then study to understand the forms of power people are striving to resist. Her two main arguments are 1) resistance and power inseparably occur at various stages of society and that these relations of power and resistance are historically transformed, and 2) the existence of dominant modes of resistance is not indicative of the failure of systems of oppression. This argument does not enable us to distinguish power or resistance as positive or negative. Furthermore, we cannot assume that their existence indicates two separate entities of belief. Power and resistance intertwine at every level.

Abu-Lughod emphasizes the importance of understanding that resistance is not original; contrarily, resistance is embedded in the preexisting structures of power. The means of resistance can take place in paths, frameworks, and rituals that were created by structures of power (i.e., Jennifer adding small embellishments to the uniform as an act of rebellion, students attending, and falling asleep at Mass, students asking combative questions in theology classes). Reading
resistance as part of the framework of power provides a more holistic perspective on the role that everyday forms of resistance play in society and helps us understand the workings of power itself.

Where Foucault’s “where there is power, there is resistance,” can be seen as a top-to-bottom approach to viewing power relations, Abu Lughod’s bottom-to-top approach to observing resistance as a diagnostic of power can be called, “where there is resistance, there is power.”

Even forms of resistance that are embedded within structures of power or subject to the social constraints are still agentic. Mahmood argues that there is agency within conforming behavior, while Abu Lughod believes that even the means of resistance are predetermined by pathways of power, which may negate how agentive the resistance is. In my thesis, all willful acts, regardless of the level of conformity or deviation, are agentive. Conformity, or compliance, is not necessarily a natural or inherent state of being. Thus, it requires agency to both conform to a culture’s expectations and rebel against them.

Academics can romanticize resistance by focusing chiefly on a singular relationship of power and resistance (i.e., the colonizer and the colonized), which neglects to provide a complete picture of the situation. Subordinate groups can contain internal divides by religious background, socioeconomic status, and other identities. Additionally, interlocutors can belong to multiple intersections of identities, potentially some that simultaneously conform and resist to the dominating norms. Such factors allow interlocutors to have “different, even opposed, but still legitimate perspectives on the situation” (Ortner 1995, 175). The graduates of Saint Margaret’s, for instance, are nuanced and have multiple identities. These intersections of identities play an important role in how the graduates navigate acceptance, conformity, and resistance against Catholic doctrine and expectations at Saint Margaret’s.
Pregnant Student Policy

Students interpreted the policy for pregnant students to be hypocritical and controversial since one of the school’s mandatory assignments is a baby project. Jennifer says, “Saint Margaret’s policy for if you actually get pregnant is you get expelled for a year, and you can’t come back until after you’ve had your baby. I thought it was odd that you could have that kind of policy in place while also making girls of the same age do a project where you have them have a baby and pretend to be taking care of a child while stigmatizing pregnancy so much for people who are actually going through it.”

The school’s policies about pregnant students further spread the stigma of pregnancy. One of my interlocutors, Jennifer, talks about students’ reactions to a girl who was pregnant at school. She says she only knows of two girls who were pregnant throughout any part of high school. “I only know of two girls who were pregnant throughout any part of high school. One was pregnant during graduation, so it wasn't that big of a deal. She just, I think, didn't tell anyone and had her kid after she graduated, so it wasn't a problem.” I know more than two who were pregnant, which comments on how stigmatized and hidden the pregnancies at our school were, as people were not encouraged to talk about their experiences with sex or pregnancy. Jennifer reflects and explains that the school’s policy for pregnant students is that they must leave the school for at least a year. The administrators I interviewed said the pregnant student must leave the school for up to two years; for instance, a student that becomes pregnant in her freshman year of high school will be allowed to return to school in her junior year.

So there's a humongous length of time, and I remember the girl who's in our grade who got pregnant. I just feel like it must have been really hard for her. Because everybody
knew that she had left because she'd had her baby. I think she was the only girl who publicly we knew got pregnant. I do feel like it is a pretty harsh punishment for somebody who's already going through an intense experience that is gonna change their life. I feel like we could, especially in a Church that advocates for compassion and for caring about other people, I guess I would've expected more support from the school, in figuring out what to do. It's like condemnation is what you get. Condemnation is what you're met with.

Jennifer envisions the pregnant student policy as a form of “punishment,” which acts as a public message sent to students about the possible consequences of premarital sexual intercourse. Condemnation, as well as academic regression, serves as the school administration’s punishment and warning to students about the dangers of forbidden sexual conduct. Mary Douglas’s theory on notions of purity and impurity as tools for maintaining hierarchies of power apply here. A student who becomes pregnant, in this case, is not only discursively expelled from the social environment, but literally expelled from the social body, the school. This type of policy sends the message to students that narrow standards of Catholic purity must be upheld at all costs.

There is an emphasis on what students do in the public sphere versus what they do in the private sphere. For instance, Jennifer mentions above that the pregnant student was the only girl that she knew of who publicly displayed pregnancy. She acknowledges that there were probably more students who were pregnant but in the privacy of their own homes. The distinction between what is private and what is public manifests itself through the public gaze and presence of surveillance. In public, students are under surveillance by administrators, nuns, and teachers. Surveillance in this context regulates how students behave in the school setting.

Slut-shaming pitted students against each other, with pregnancy as a visual indicator of one’s sexual activity. Amber speaks to the taboo of pregnancy present at Saint Margaret’s.

If you get pregnant, you have to have the baby. But then also, you're taught that only certain kinds of people are out here having [in a dramatic voice] SEX. So then, you're thinking things about your classmates because there's a visual indicator that they've had sex, and also, you're learning that like people that have [in the dramatic voice again] SEX
outside of marriage are like SINFUL. So I feel like you're also being pitted against your classmates. I remember having lots of slut-shamey thoughts as a teenager that I don't have now. You can't prove anyone had sex, but if you're pregnant, it's obvious. So it's extra taboo. But I remember having those kinds of feelings. It was stupid that our school would make us commit to the child instead of having abortions.

Pregnancy carried a more significant taboo due to its visual bodily presence. The gaze over pregnancy belongs not only to the teachers but to students as well. Students become smaller actors, enforcing surveillance of sexual behavior – and consequently, conformity to Catholic standards – on each other. As Foucault claims about surveillant states, after a while, the self internalizes the surveillance and performs the institution’s job.

The pregnant student policy and administration’s handling of pregnancy taught students that only certain types of girls (e.g., rebellious, loud, unintelligent) have premarital sex. Crystal tells me that she was only aware of one girl who got pregnant in high school: “But it was like the last person that I expected too. Like she's super soft-spoken. She was just super smart, and then all of a sudden she left, and then she was pregnant, and I had no idea and then she came back, and I was like, oh my God, she has a kid!” Here, it seems that there are certain social expectations of someone who becomes pregnant in high school. For instance, a girl who becomes premaritally pregnant must be loud, the opposite of "soft-spoken." Crystal also mentions that this particular girl's pregnancy surprised her because she was "super smart." Thus, there are hidden implications for the type of girl that chooses to have premarital sex. Many assumptions about pregnancy are made, seemingly without correction from the school.

The school not only failed to correct misunderstandings about sex but fed into the misunderstandings and exacerbated them in the theology curriculum, as I detailed in the last chapter. Crystal’s statement mirrors the shock that many students felt upon realizing that one of our peers was pregnant. “Do you know why she had to leave? No, I have no idea. That besides
you know that she was going to have a child and she had to look after it sort of thing. That was my guess. I didn't know if Saint Margaret’s had a policy, like you can't be pregnant while you're here, or you can't be visually pregnant. I wasn't close to her at all. I knew about her. However, there was no talk about it, you know.” She acknowledges that there was "no talk about it," but does not ask why.

Why weren't students talking about a topic that intrigued so many of them? “It wasn't really like negative. It was just like oh my God, she was pregnant, and we had no idea sort of thing. There was no like negative connotation as far as I could tell. It was more, like she has a kid now, great cool, you know. But that was just like my experience with whomever I talked to. It was mostly like that. No gossip or anything.” This statement does not acknowledge the taboo nature of pregnancy. At the same time that Crystal says that within the school, there was "no gossip," simultaneously, her reaction to the pregnancy is "oh my God, she has a kid!" The shocking nature of her pregnancy seems in part due to the stigma surrounding pregnancy at Saint Margaret's.

**Prom Policies**

The heteronormative prom policies reinforced the message that students could not act on their sexual desires. Jennifer tells me about how she experienced and interpreted the prom regulations. Activities outside of the classroom context were monitored and regulated as heavily as activities conducted inside the classroom context.

Of course, it’s okay to bring a guy who’s like five years older than you, but if you just want to go with a girl who you either are dating or is just one of your close friends, it is completely not okay! I don’t know what kind of crazy – I don’t know! That was an uncomfortable thing to do but didn’t surprise me because even in Theology of the Body,
this is something that I remember, this is how they discussed being gay, as ‘It’s okay to be gay, but to act on your feelings and to have gay sex – That’s the really sinful thing to do.’ So it doesn’t surprise me, but it does sadden me that even an act that would remotely denote being with a girl would be not okay in prom.

I remember being single, having all friends who were girls, and wanting to take a friend to prom, but I was not allowed to do so. This anecdote comments on how severely heteronormativity was taught and ingrained in the students at Saint Margaret's.

Students must avoid the male gaze by regulating their attire, specifically for prom. This philosophy echoes the notion from John Paul II that a woman must regulate herself as not to be an object for men. The man is not held accountable. Amber explains various regulations that she remembers about prom. She mentions that our whole group of friends went stag.

They [the administration] definitely were not okay with appearing gay in any way. You can't bring a girl-date friend. They also had some age restriction, but I can't remember if it was creepy or not. I know they had some limit like they can't be ‘this many’ years older than you. But I don't remember how many years. They had a dress code. A certain amount of midriff wasn't allowed. A certain cut, a certain length, slit length had to be a certain amount.

But why these restrictions? Like the uniform, the attire restrictions for prom operated under the assumption that women should not 'be an object for men' and that they must regulate their sexuality and gender performance to conform.

**Interactions with Administration**

The way administrators forced an openly gay couple at Saint Margaret’s to split up taught students that they could not be gay, and if they acted on their feelings, their academic careers might be at stake. Amber talks about her experience with this.

I do remember the way that like, our faculty reacted to like gay students was really weird. I don't know if you remember Jaclyn and Claire. They were a couple that was older than
us by a few years. The faculty found out that they were together and switched some of their classes. They basically made them break up. They would be in the principal's office every day crying. And they would be in there like crying every day at lunch. It was crazy because they made them break up!

' Weird' is a mild way to describe the school administrators’ explicitly homophobic act against a pair of gay students. This mild language possibly serves to show the loyalty that students still have toward Saint Margaret's, despite fundamental disagreement with Catholic values. I will discuss Saint Margaret’s graduates’ sense of appreciation and loyalty to the school in the last chapter.

Amber told me that her observation of the administration’s handling of the situation was “a lesson very early on that it's not okay to be in a relationship with another woman. Like under any circumstance.” The school administration's interactions with other students served as its own form of sexual education to all students. Amber's use of the specific word, "lesson," highlights that sexual learning happened not only in the context of the classroom but outside of the classroom as well. “So I think that's one thing that stood out to me, where I was like, ‘Oh shit.’ If I was to do that, I would not be able to be found out.” Many other students felt this anxiety. As a closeted bisexual girl in high school, I felt nervous showing any signs of closeness or romance to other girls. Instead, I used my journal as an outlet, containing feelings and thoughts that would have been condemnable in the school context. Since many students felt this way and thus hid behaviors that would have been condemnable by the Church, it makes sense that the student sexual experience was primarily hidden and siloed. Amber speaks more to this.

I also don't think a lot of people knew I was like, not straight, in high school. I had a crush on Ashley Kobayashi at one point, but like I was just like, she's way too hot for me [starts laughing]. I feel like there's that whole, you don't want people to know you're not straight because then there's the risk of the admins doing something or intervening or they think that there's something amiss, they're gonna correct it, or maybe they won't like you as much.
The power dynamics between the administration and students further prevented students from feeling free to act on their sexual desires, especially if those desires did not align with heteronormativity or the Catholic notion of chastity. Here, it is the threat of punishment that is daunting. Conformity to the Catholic sexual script is a consequence of Foucauldian surveillance. Punishment is not necessary to ensure people's alignment with regulations and expectations. Conformity is possible even with the threat of punishment, rather than the punishment itself.

Jennifer felt angry about the dynamics of power within the school and the language of sin. She believes that the school used shame tactics to control students.

I always felt angry. Just angry that we were being made to feel so small and so aware of the sin we were perpetuating. And that always struck me as not the best way to get people to stop doing something. It just makes people more likely not to want to tell anyone, for fear that there will be repercussions to speaking up and saying you are masturbating, and what should you do? I think the Catholic church uses shame as a motivating factor in a lot of situations.

Amber felt that the school’s teaching of sex (or lack thereof) portrayed highly gendered expectations, in which men want sex and women do not. The school's theology curriculum possibly fed into misconceptions and stereotypes that already existed outside of Catholic pedagogy (i.e., women are only the objects of sexual desire). “I think I felt ashamed of having-I felt like I was too sexual. People always maintain that men have way harder sex drives. There are all these jokes that women never wanna put out or whatever. I felt like a freak and an anomaly for wanting sex so much, for being a sexual person.” Being a ‘sexual person’ here brings a negative connotation. Amber, along with several of her peers, admitted thinking that possessing sexual desires had become an undesirable trait, rather than a natural part of sexual and physical development.
Small-Scale Rebellion and Implicit Resistance

Saint Margaret’s participated in small-scale acts of rebellion that fit into the category of implicit resistance (see Figure 1 in the Introduction). “Rebellion” is a self-defined term that my interlocutors used to describe their behaviors, while “implicit resistance” is the term I use to describe actions that are neither outwardly compliant nor outwardly resistant to the dominating systems of power. Here, students participated in this kind of symbolic resistance by asking slightly controversial questions in theology classes, adding embellishments to the school uniform, watching pornography or reading erotic fiction in class, and participating in discreet conversations about sex with friends. Jennifer directed many questions toward the nuns in theology class as a form of rebellion to signal to other students that they could publicly disagree with Catholic teachings.

I asked questions that – I don’t want to say antagonistic – but that was aimed at um, really making people think about what was going on in our classes and think critically about what we were being taught, especially with Sister Mary. I had a lot of questions for her. I remember our friends being like, ‘You should probably tone it down a little bit.’ You know, that’s the whole point of school, to ask questions and form your own opinions, and using your teachers as people to help guide you.

Jennifer’s anecdote begs the question of how her relatively minuscule rebellion compares to the scale of power or oppression coming down from the school’s administration. That asking questions seems a form of rebellion points to a source of power at which the rebellion is aimed. This power dynamic implies that the norm for students would be not to ask questions or share opposing beliefs in theology class.

Jennifer also added embellishments to the uniform as an act of rebellion against the school.
I would wear beanies and gloves, even though that wasn’t part of the dress code. Mrs. Mullins stopped me a few times and was like, “I like your outfit, good job.” I just found that so funny because, of course, she approved of that sort of thing. I think she liked people figuring things out for themselves and pushing gently against the status quo. *Emphasis on gently.* Very gently! Nothing too crazy.

Jennifer’s qualifying of ‘pushing against the status quo’ with the word “gently” reminds the readers of the difference of scale between the regulating forces of oppression and the relatively small-scale student rebellion. Additionally, embellishing the uniform in this situation becomes an act of rebellion and deviance due to the norm of the uniform at Saint Margaret’s. Uniform embellishment is an example of resistance embedded within habits, rituals, activities – even attire – established by the dominating systems of power. “I didn’t want to do anything to make people feel super uncomfortable, even though I was uncomfortable in a lot of religion classes, I don’t feel like you’re not going to change people, especially nuns. You’re not going to change a nun’s opinion about God or their views on the church or anything. But it is good to just ask questions because it tells other people that it’s okay to do that too! Which I think is important.”

Meanwhile, Amber read fanfiction in class as symbolic resistance against Catholic norms.

I was out here, reading fanfiction in class. I got really into True Blood because of Saint Margaret’s. True Blood was a super sexual show, and it was all a metaphor for homophobia. It was like God hates fangs, where being a vampire was a metaphor for being gay. They even had a thing that was like: vampires came out of the coffin! Legit! I was gay and sexually repressed. I was like give me all of this!

This rebellion is not only symbolically embedded in systems of power but physically embedded inside the classroom. Jennifer’s small-scale rebellion in the form of minor changes to our school uniform and Amber’s reading of fanfiction in class are examples of what I call “implicit resistance,” or modes of agency that are neither explicit resistance nor explicit compliance.
Crystal’s implicit resistance took the form of discreet conversations about sex with her friends at school. “I had brave conversations with like my closest friends. It would only be with my closest friends, and these are like, again, really brief. It was totally taboo! You know, like, oh my God, like I did this last night, and I like totally used a sex toy or some shit.” Crystal calls the conversations "brave" because it did take bravery to talk about sex in the school context. One ran the risk of social stigma or punishment if one chose to talk about taboos at school. “It would never be like in-depth complications about that just because it was so weird. We weren't at the maturity level to actually talk about stuff like that because we would just giggle and be like, oh my God, I can't believe you did that, blah blah blah. But we did talk about it a little, which was surprising.” But were the students not mature enough for sexual learning in reality, or were they taught that they were not at the 'right' maturity level? The surveillance techniques used at Saint Margaret’s, rather than preventing Crystal from engaging in sexual activity or quelling Crystal’s sexual curiosity, pushed Crystal further from Catholicism. Ultimately, Crystal displayed agency and implicit resistance via private conversations about sex with a few close friends. Other students resorted to discreet conversations, as I describe below.

The “Hush Environment” Surrounding Sex, Pleasure, Pregnancy

Students found conversations about sex to be acutely uncomfortable when they were at school. Thus, not many students talked openly about it. Jennifer believes that conversations regarding sex and masturbation were uncomfortable to have in school settings because of the stigma surrounding sex in the Catholic Church. She says there was “much stigma in the Catholic church about doing anything…that’s sexually related.” She goes on to discuss the adverse
psychological effects this can have on people. “Among militant Christian groups, they’ll tell you things like, if you masturbate, hair’s gonna grow on the palms of your hands, and everyone will know how sinful you are. My dad was told that a lot growing up, so I don’t know. You’re not going to stop people from masturbating! You’re just going to make them feel bad about doing it, I think.”

Although teachers and administrators may have hoped that the theology curriculum would reach students and influence their lifestyles and behaviors, students – especially non-Catholic students – did not change their behavior. Paradoxically, they continued the same behaviors that would be considered unacceptable in the Catholic faith. Jennifer is trying to communicate that students are still going to engage in sexual behavior, but with added shame and guilt: “I wonder why sometimes the Catholic church hasn’t tried to be a little bit more flexible about its views because it’s hanging onto a time period where people find some Catholic views antiquated and difficult to understand.” This belief is presumably the generational gap between Saint Margaret's teachers and students. The Catholic Church’s use of ancient texts in teaching is often a part of its framing as immune to social change. My informants’ and my experience contradict this framing; the whole system is not necessarily timeless. While teachers mean well, their curriculums sent outdated messages that did not reach the students.

Neither students nor faculty talked about pregnancy at school due to stigma. Definitely, the faculty didn’t talk about it. A lot of my classmates talked about it. Among friends, you could talk about it a little bit. There were some whispers about it. It would be like, ‘Look on Instagram. So-and-so and blah blah blah.’ But like, largely, there was a very hush atmosphere over it, where you can’t really talk about it. And I remember having this sort of slut-shamey feelings, of like I can’t believe she did that. And I can’t believe she didn’t use a condom or whatever. I definitely thought that it was dumb of her not to use protection. But I also had this awareness that like we were being taught not to use protection, that there was this real risk of pregnancy, which is, that wasn't really a good idea at that age. To get pregnant [giggles]. I can't imagine having a kid right now. I don't remember a lot of people talking about it.
Looking from top to bottom on the power hierarchy: Why the hush?

On the one hand, the “hush environment” or the silence surrounding the topic of sex is indicative of the power dynamics between administrators and students, in which administrators can control student behavior. Students must discuss taboo subjects quietly and discreetly as not to be caught. The “hush environment” again represents the real fear of social alienation and ostracization due to a perceived lack of purity. Mary Douglas’ theory on the notion of purity as a tool for social order applies here. While the “impure” act of being premaritally pregnant at Saint Margaret’s results in a one- to two-year-long expulsion (a literal ejection from the social body), the “impurity” of discussing sex leaves one subject to a more subtle social exile, alienation, and judgment.

On the other hand, the “hush environment” is not complete conformity to the school’s rules and expectations, insofar as students still participate in small-scale acts of resistance. Where there is power, there is indeed resistance. This kind of resistance may be considered implicit resistance, in that, “hush” conversations about sex and sexuality are not necessarily denunciations of Catholic ideology or the written policies for Saint Margaret’s student; yet, the existence of these type of conversations represent an implicit and symbolic mode of resistance.

Looking from bottom to top: the “hush environment,” as my interlocutor describes it, is resistance in the form of students discreetly discussing sex and sexuality. That they must converse privately points to a source of oppression: the administration. Abu-Lughod would consider this approach to studying relations of power an example of resistance as a diagnostic of power.

One of my interlocutors, Crystal, felt guilty for being sexually active and acknowledges that we did not learn about pleasure. “Like people weren't supposed to talk about sex in general
just because we were in high school when you know we were too young to do anything.”

Crystal’s statement mirrors the idea in *TOB for Teens* that students do not know their own bodies or values yet and thus, need to be taught by Catholic experts. This position also operates under the assumption that there is a certain age in which people can start to demonstrate sexual desire or merely talk about sex. “However, it was like- I'm going to be honest. I was sexually active in high school like towards the end, and I felt guilty for doing all those things even though it felt good, you know.” Even throughout our recorded conversation, I could tell that Crystal was uncomfortable talking about her sexual history. Besides words like "guilt" and "shame," Crystal's body language and pauses while she spoke revealed some discomfort around the topic of sex. 

“[Pleasure] wasn't really like a big idea as far as when we learned about sex in general. Even though it was like a side conversation and we're supposed to enjoy it, they never explicitly said, hey, it's okay to feel good when you do this.” The school's lack of discourse about pleasure profoundly impacted Crystal's experience, which may suggest that sexual education curriculums need to explicitly embrace pleasure and sexual desire for students to have positive relationships with their bodies and sexualities.

Crystal believes that schools could mitigate shame if they taught students about sex earlier.

If we were taught about sex earlier in our lives, we wouldn't feel so ashamed about talking about it. The more you're exposed to something, the more you're likely to be less ashamed to talk about it. Now, everybody's like- since we're past the point where we're more mature, we can talk about it- because I wouldn't talk to you about this in high school or even right out of high school. *You wouldn't have?* No, I would be like, I don't want to do that. I would have been like, ‘this is weird.’ I would be really, really uncomfortable.

In the interview, I was shocked that Crystal said this. I probably should not have been shocked because I felt uncomfortable talking about sexuality with others at my school. This anecdote
demonstrates the distinct differences between the environment inside and outside Catholic school and the progression of students' mentalities.

Conclusion

Although the *Theology of the Body for Teens* curriculum meant to inform students about sexuality, they learned more about sexuality-related norms outside of the traditional classroom context via conforming to and resisting the Saint Margaret’s policies. Ultimately, my interlocutors criticized the stigma surrounding pregnancy while participating in the social systems that served to maintain such shame. Additionally, the way administrators forced an openly gay couple at Saint Margaret’s to split up taught students that they couldn’t be gay, and if they acted on their feelings, their academic careers might be at stake. In Foucauldian fashion, what is kept hidden becomes taboo, and taboos are ritually kept hidden, creating an endless discursive cycle of deviance. The heteronormative prom policies reinforced the message that students could not act on their sexual desires. Students found conversations about sex to be acutely uncomfortable when they were at school. Thus, not many students talked openly about it.

Looking from bottom to top: the “hush environment,” as my interlocutor describes it, is resistance in the form of students discreetly talking about sex and sexuality. That they must discuss privately points to a source of oppression: the administration. Abu-Lughod would consider this an example of resistance as a diagnostic of power. However, Foucauldian surveillance only limits students’ sexual curiosities and desires to an extent. The next chapter
details what I call self-curated sexual education, a combination of informal sources that students use to learn about sex privately.
Chapter 4. Self-Curated Sexual Education and Exploration

While my interlocutors may have looked uniform and behaved in conformity while at Saint Margaret’s – due to surveillance and strict regulations – in their new contexts, their relationships to themselves and others have grown in diverse ways. They have explored sex and sexuality through talking to family members, exploring the internet, engaging in sexual activities, enrolling in formal classes, and reflecting on their relationships with themselves and others. The sexual education (both formal and informal) students received in their time at Saint Margaret’s had concrete implications for their bodies and their identities (e.g., sexual orientations, physical conditions, desires, beliefs). This sexual education has manifested in a range of my interlocutors’ lived sexual experiences, but consistently, each found their own version of self-defined empowerment. Katherine decided she loved being single, Crystal got married, Amber learned more about her body and sexuality, and Jennifer is learning more about sexual desire and dating. The vast range of how these all-girls Catholic school graduates respond to morality-based sexual education demonstrates the complicated nature of sexual education.

Since the students’ use of hidden transcripts while in attendance of Catholic school masked their genuine beliefs and ideologies, studying their reflections on the experience years later can paint a more nuanced picture. This thesis underlines the past, present, and potentially future to highlight the ways graduates have “reacted” over time to the education they received at Saint Margaret’s. In James Scott’s fieldwork with agrarian peasants, he found that once the subordinate individuals were released from their surveillant systems of domination, their “reactions” were opposite of their behavior while under surveillance (1990a, 109). While
under surveillance, Saint Margaret’s students all may have seemed in conformity (besides the pregnant students, who were subject to the consequences of visual indicators of deviance). However, when the graduates were released from their surveillant environment, I learned that they were and are engaging in various forms of behavior resistant against Catholic norms (e.g., participating in premarital sex, watching pornography, discussing pleasure, using sex toys). Furthermore, Scott found that “surveillance itself, as an emanation of compulsion, further increased the degree of reaction,” as in, the stronger the surveillant structures, the stronger the reactions from the subordinate group (1990a, 109).17 Just as Eve felt drawn to the Forbidden Fruit in Genesis, initiating Original Sin, so too were the Saint Margaret’s graduates called to sexual exploration and sexual learning.

In the last two chapters, I established that Saint Margaret’s students expressed agency through utilizing forms of implicit resistance – such as using hidden transcripts or gossip, consuming erotic materials, and asking questions in theology class. Many of these acts were private, individualized, and siloed. In this chapter, I hope to explore how Saint Margaret’s graduates practice agency in the form of both implicit and outright resistance to the Catholic sexual script.

While the notion of agency was initially used to describe individuals’ capabilities to act, more recently, scholars have complicated the definition to include a range of human intentionality and lived experiences. As scholars began increasingly to use the term as a synonym for resistance, Saba Mahmood (2011) argues that agency should not be defined merely in terms of one’s ability to resist against dominating ideology. Instead, she asserts, specifically in feminist anthropology, agency should measure one’s ability to act per societal expectations and

norms – The concept of women’s agency should include one’s decision to suffer and persist under patriarchy. Additionally, agency and choice are not necessarily the best ways to describe or measure women’s experience, as it creates a binary of resistance and conformity. In this chapter, I wish to explore Saint Margaret’s students’ sexual agency – both understanding and performing sex and sexuality – in terms of conformity to Catholic expectations, resistance to these expectations, and something in between. My interlocutors’ actions that may not fit into a simple binary of compliance and resistance make up the category of implicit resistance (see Figure 1 in the Introduction). The way the graduates interact with implicit resistance, ultimately, plays a crucial role in their sexual learning.

Along those lines, I wish to foreground the voices of my interlocutors in this chapter to provide them with a platform to share how far they have come in their identities, bodies, relationships to others, and understandings of sex and gender. Their participation in my research, furthermore, points to a part of their sexual agency, courage, and growth. This chapter aims to continue to answer the question: given limited information about sex, how do abstinence-only program graduates come to know about sex? The chapter is organized by the sources my informants used to gain information about sex (e.g., family, the internet, masturbation, sex with others, formal classes) and how these women’s sexual learning informs their relationships and identities. Their narratives reveal the lasting implications of negotiating sexuality and simultaneously, the challenges and rewards of expressing sexual agency.
Learning from Family Members

Many of the students at Saint Margaret’s went to family members for information about sex before turning to other sources. Katherine and Amber detail their experiences of learning about sex and sexuality with their mothers. Katherine learned about sex from her mom, her aunt, and Theology of the Body for Teens. In this quote, she describes how speaking with her mother informed her own agentive choices.

I have three sisters and a very comfortable, open relationship with my mom. And so we had already talked about sex and the biological, physical aspects of it, but also like social-emotional, with my mom and as sisters. [I mostly learned] about her experiences with relationships before my parents got married, and then after they were married. And I was raised in a Catholic home, and I am still Catholic, so my parents taught us a lot of concepts that are similar to Theology of the Body what we learned at Saint Margaret’s. So like respecting your sexuality and like just the kind of rationale. They would have conversations with us about like 'this is how we were raised, or this is what we practice in our relationship and like this is why we think the way that we do.' And then having a conversation about that with us of basically like: 'sex is a good thing. Sex is like a beautiful thing in the right context. But you don't want to just like give- like you wouldn't tell everything about yourself to someone that you just met and if you're not willing to give all of yourself in like an emotional sense or like in the sense of your interests and your identity to someone, why would you give your whole body in such an intimate way to someone?' And that made a lot of sense to me. I found it affirming to realize that I have control.

Katherine’s language of sexual intercourse, a “giving” of one’s full self, echoes the wording in our Theology of the Body for Teens lessons, which taught that engaging in sexual activity sends the message, “I give you all of me.” While many students interpreted TOB for Teens’ messaging as slut-shaming or limiting to their senses of sexual freedom, Katherine felt she understood it due to being exposed to similar messaging at home. Furthermore, it was not upsetting to Katherine, as it was to other students because her interpretation of the messaging provided her a sense of control. Visualizing sex as something one possesses and thus, something one may lose sets up a
framework in which “respecting your sexuality” necessitates protecting your sexuality (i.e., being abstinent).

The exploration that students performed past the school’s walls may also point to the theology curriculum’s inadequacy, that it was not comprehensive enough to satisfy students’ curiosities, or that it did not answer the questions students had about sex and sexuality. For the students that contributed to this project, the *Theology of the Body for Teens* curriculum hardly scratched the surface. Katherine’s experience highlights the need for a supportive and open home environment in which students may discuss topics that intrigue them. Katherine mentions that her mother became a close source of sex-related information and that her image of her mom as “a very strong, confident, and beautiful woman in a healthy relationship” allowed her to become more accepting and more open to the Catholic ideas surrounding sex.

Amber’s mom, like Katherine’s mom, opened candid discussions about sex and pleasure regularly. That both Katherine and Amber reached out to their families for sexuality-related information speaks again to the need, regardless of religious practice, for a supportive environment at home to freely and openly discuss sex. Amber’s mother taught her from a young age about masturbation.

But yeah, I started masturbating pretty early on. My mom like- had shown me the whole [pauses] birds and the bees when I started my period at like ten. Because she knew Saint Margaret's wasn't going to do it. So she was like, ‘Here's a book. We're going to talk about this. It's okay to touch yourself. It's normal. People do that.’ So I think that was super cool and useful and helpful. And I think I would have had more problems if I hadn't had that also.

Amber and Katherine both reaped the educational benefits of having close relationships with their mothers, and at the same time, they learned very different material. In either case, it proved extremely important to Amber and Katherine to have these open spaces for sex-related discussion. The content at Catholic school was not shocking to Amber since she had already
learned about sex from her mom. Amber’s mother told her that Catholic school was not teaching her the truth.

I know from both my mom and reading too much fanfiction and all these other things that like it's something else, that I'm not being taught. So it's more of like once I started to experience it, I was just like yup, I was right. Catholic school taught me fake shit. So I don't feel like it was super shocking to me, but I think that I was like, it had reaffirmed that what Catholic school was teaching us was wrong. Because even when I was in Catholic school, I would go home and make fun of what we were learning to my mom. I'd be like, 'They said this! L-O-L! That's stupid. Of course, you should use condoms!'

**Learning from the Internet**

Author of *Girls & Sex*, Peggy Orenstein reveals formal sexual education’s inadequacies, as students have increasingly relied on pornography to fill the gaps. She states “according to a [National Union of Students] survey of college students in Britain, 60% consult pornography, at least in part, as though it were an instruction manual, even as nearly three-quarters say that they know it is as realistic as pro wrestling” (Orenstein 2016b). Similarly, the Saint Margaret’s graduates, while acknowledging that the online content they consumed may not have been the “best source material” for sex-related information, they nevertheless continue to view the information available, compensating for years of inadequate formal education.

Katherine, Amber, and Jennifer used the internet to satisfy their curiosities. The sources they used include pornography, online articles, magazines, and chatrooms. Katherine, despite her close relationship with her mom, read articles online to supplement her sexual learning.

As a kid in middle school and high school, just reading magazines or articles on the internet that suggested 'oh, I don't know, 'the ways to spice up your sex life' and things like that. I would look at that, and I found some books in my mom’s room that I would like to read or glance through occasionally, but mostly conversations with her. The books were about sexuality in general. And there are some – I guess this is not directly related

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but – just about periods and learning to track your cycle to know when you’re due for your period but also like when you’re ovulating and like the Natural Family Planning method. And these books you just found at home? Yeah, and the one that I was talking about, the book about Natural Family Planning, that's just like in the living room all the time [laughing]. I don't think it was purposely like put there, but it was just there. So me and my cousins – I remember this – me and my younger sister, who's two years younger than me and my cousin whose around the same age, we would like to go through it together and like laugh and like talk about the different things that it was talking about. I remember we did that a few times. We'd all sit on the couch together and read the book together. It was hilarious.

Meanwhile, Amber used porn as a way to understand sex. “I watched a fair amount of porn when I was in high school, or I think middle school was when I watched the most porn. I was just trying to wrap my head around things and understand things. I remember that like, porn with guys freaked me out. I was only comfortable seeing women for the longest time. Um, and then eventually, I upgraded to like seeing couples [laughing], and I was like okay [laughing]. I remember it freaked me out, but I wanted to see and learn more.”

Paradoxically, Amber joined online chatrooms to talk to people about sex to mitigate the taboo. “But I also did weird stuff on the internet to branch out and get comfortable. In high school, I would go on omegl chatrooms and stuff and talk to people about sex or whatever, if they asked me something. And I'd give them fake emails if they tried to be creepy and asked for my email. I did weird shit like that to either engage in the taboo or to mitigate the taboo for me.”

Meanwhile, Jennifer used the internet and magazines, like Cosmo and Vogue, to learn about sex.

I feel like the internet was the biggest thing that I used if I ever had questions about my anatomy or what was going on or feelings that I had, or just sex ed in general. I would either ask my parents if it wasn’t something that I was too embarrassed to talk about with them, or I would go online and read about other people’s experiences and what they said. Although I think some of that wasn’t the best source material because magazines and sites like Cosmo or Vogue aren’t necessarily giving the most scientifically accurate or helpful information about sex.
Learning by Doing

A CDC study surveyed 15-17-year-old teenagers in the U.S. who have had sex and found that nearly 80% had not had formal sexual education before engaging in sexual activity for the first time (Cox et al. 2014, 6). For many of these students, especially those that may not have open environments at home, having sex may be the first time they are exposed to any sexual information. Sexually exploring, then, becomes an unregulated, unsupervised form of sexual learning that students may perform privately.

Paradoxically, it seems that Saint Margaret’s abstinence-only education, rather than quelling students’ sexual desire, actually pushed students to want to learn more about sex via any resources available or to “react” to the restrictive school context. James Scott observed of his informants, “once the surveillance was withdrawn, the compliance evaporated quickly” (1990a, 109). My informants felt an urge to pursue information regarding sexuality after being released from the surveillant environment at Saint Margaret’s. But without an open, nonjudgmental environment at school to discuss sex, where are students to go? I argue that the students’ early sexual experiences served as an informal aspect of their sexual learning and thus constitute sex education. “Doing” sex then becomes a form of “learning sex” and a cornerstone of Saint Margaret’s self-curated sexual education. Crystal and Jennifer took the opportunity to reflect on their earliest experiences with sex and pleasure.

Before her marriage, Crystal used Tinder and often felt lonely after her one-night-stands. She ultimately created her own list of sexual guidelines.

So before I met Jeremy, which is his name – that’s my husband’s name. You know, I was on Tinder. I would go, and I would just do my own thing. I’d have a lot of one-night stands. Then, there came a certain point – I had a really big phase like straight out of high school – I think I met up with like five guys in one week. So that was like a new guy
every night. It was insane. Like I just completely ho'ed out. I had that phase, and then I had the phase before Jeremy. So right before Jeremy came into my life, you know, I had a rule. I was like, ‘You know what, I'm not going to sleep with you on the first night. That is my only rule.’ Okay. And I think that only worked with like one person out of many [we both laugh]. However, you know, I was trying to set a really clear boundary because I didn't want any more one-night stands. It just wasn't worth it. You know, it felt lonely. So even though sex felt good at the moment, you know, like after that point, it was just like what am I doing? Like I'm never going to see that person again, probably unless it's for sex. And that's not fun. You know, I just want friends that I can have sex with! Is that so hard to ask for? And so that's when I started implementing the whole ‘not sleeping with you on the first night.’ However, I slept with Jeremy on the first night, and then I promised him like I would see him again blah blah blah. But yeah, that was kind of the whole thing. And it mostly came down to raw attraction most of the time. That was more the beginning of relationships. And that's how it started with Jeremy too. So I can't say anything about him being too different from anybody else.

Crystal’s “reaction” to being released from Saint Margaret’s matches James Scott’s use of reactance theory, insofar as she heavily explores sex with others “straight out of high school,” the restrictive environment. Like Scott’s informants, Crystal felt eager to express her agency in ways that are condemnable by the systems of power. At the same time, Crystal felt guilty when she participated in pre-marital sex. Her choice to engage in pre-marital sex demonstrates her agency, while her guilt pushes her to behave more closely in compliance with the Catholic guidelines and demonstrates her ties to the Catholic sexual script.

Yeah, there was a lot of guilt involved [in pre-marital sex] just because there was no real attachment.” Here, "real attachment" means marriage. “You didn't have to stay just because you had sex with them. It was more, oh is this going to be a one night stand, or is this going to last so, but that was kind of like that experience. The real attachment, you mean marriage? Yeah, like there's commitment in that, even like boyfriend-girlfriend, there's still like a chance that you're not going to see each other ever again.

Throughout the recorded conversation, Crystal is negotiating which Catholic expectations she wants to conform to and which ones she rejects. Although she wants to engage in pre-marital sexual behavior, which is considered a sin in the Catholic faith, she still would like to believe there is some level of commitment. Resistance is complex. The choice of whether or not to engage in pre-marital sex becomes a battlefield of questions, doubts, and anxieties that
potentially trigger even deeper concerns about one’s identities and belief systems. Thus, it is highly agentive to decide either way, to have sex before marriage or to wait. While one may agree with and conform to certain Catholic ideologies, one may simultaneously choose to reject certain Catholic principles. Crystal, for instance, justifies her decision to engage in pre-marital sex but makes the distinction between commitment and marriage, the latter signifying the highest level of commitment in her mind. Crystal felt guilty masturbating but felt better about it once she stopped believing in God.

Early on, [the experience of masturbating] was really guilty, like super duper guilty, like ooh you're not supposed to do that because you know, like I was kind of- I was like 50% religious up until like senior year and now, I'm like not religious at all. So, in the beginning, they would always say like- we always hear like, ‘Masturbation is a sin, you're not supposed to do that, because you're only supposed to do that with a man.’ So, of course, I was like, oh my God, this is terrible, but I'm gonna do it anyway because it feels good! And then after I'm like, what did I just do?

Crystal's participation in sexual activity despite guilt echoes Jennifer's point about students still engaging in sexual behavior but just feeling bad about it afterward because of the Catholic curriculum's influence. “And then senior year of high school hits, and I'm like, I don't give a fuck! [Realizing she swore] oh sorry! I don't care anymore because who's gonna judge me? God's obviously not there! They're acting like He's in the room! So yeah, I literally don't mind it at all anymore. If I need to, I will, and you know, I don't feel any guilt about it. I can say for sure that I don't.” I wonder if she needs to tell herself that God doesn't exist to be able to experience pleasure fully. What would her experience be like if she could have learned about a sex-positive God?

The teaching that “God is always watching” exacerbates Crystal’s feelings of guilt and anxiety surrounding masturbation. She refers to this in the form of “God is in the room.” This type of language is a symbolic panopticon, in that it causes students to believe that they are
always under surveillance. Crystal’s guilt is the type of language representative of Foucault’s panopticon, referenced in Chapter 3. Like Foucault’s explanation of panopticon, in which all prisoners feel as though they might be under the prison guards’ gaze at any moment, Saint Margaret’s students believe that they are always under surveillance and thus behave accordingly. There need not be any guards in the watchtower for it to control the prisoners’ behavior. The Catholic Church, intentionally or not, uses the notion of observation as a crucial apparatus of power, with God’s omnipresent gaze as a form of a panopticon.

Crystal had an experience with one of her gay girlfriends that showed some of her prejudices.

I don’t want to be politically incorrect – and I’m still figuring this out because this is very recent – but I was definitely bi-curious in high school. Because like, it was like only with the girls that looked like guys. Like if you were masculine in any way, I kind of was like, hmm, you’re kind of cute. But I’m not attracted to girls, but you’re still- you look like a guy enough that you’re cute. That being said, I lost one of my close friends because I told her I had a crush on her, and she liked me, and then, in the end, I chose Jeremy over her because he was a guy, and I was comfortable with that. I never explored that side because I was scared. I was scared because – and this is shallow, but – I only knew how to have sex with guys, and I think that was a part of what she wanted. And like, I was afraid. I thought that as soon as I kissed her, I would have to stay with her, and it would ruin the whole friendship. So yeah, there were times where I wanted to kiss her, but I backed out at the last second because I was super afraid. What if I don’t like this? So I never tried. And that was that.

Crystal's anecdote highlights the possibility and influence of sexual education as a way to inform students of the diversity of sexual orientations.

Jennifer, similarly, learned about sex in part by engaging in sexual intercourse in high school. She reflects on her first sexual relationship and ways that she could have cultivated healthier relationships. Ultimately, through the process of “doing” sex, Jennifer learned more about herself and her relationships.

Besides that, though, I think that because I started having sex in high school, that was like another way I found out about stuff. I don’t think I was a late bloomer. In fact, I think I
started having sex when I was 16, which is from what I understand is a little on the younger side, but pretty average for teenagers. That was one way, but my first relationship wasn’t the healthiest or greatest when it came to learning about myself and what I wanted because a lot of the focus in my relationship was on what my partner wanted, and how to make him happy and feel better. And because I was young and didn’t understand what I wanted yet, I was okay with that. Being out of that relationship and in a much healthier relationship, a more reciprocal relationship, has also taught me a lot about what’s important to me and how to make myself feel good—that sort of thing.

Jennifer’s first partner pressured her to have sex earlier than she wanted, and she felt anxiety surrounding sex. Now, she feels less anxiety.

When I was with my first partner, especially because I think I kind of dreaded having sex, I also have, for most of my adult life, had intense issues with my body image, which kind of played into a lot of insecurities about having sex. I think to be with a partner who was critical of me and how I looked and how I was fueled those insecurities. And they extended to a lot of parts of my life, including having sex. I feel like I did feel a lot of pressure from him to have sex. We definitely started having sex earlier than I wanted to. And later, in relationships I had after, I waited a lot longer, from starting to date to messing around and doing stuff, and it’s always sat with me a lot better. In my first relationship, I just didn't know how to advocate for myself, and as a woman, being met with these societal ideas of being passive and being a recipient of sex instead of an active participant, it's hard to figure out how to navigate that and how to also be aware of your sexual desires and wants and how to explain that to your partner in ways that make you both comfortable. Now, I feel like I don't experience as much of that anxiety. But it's also just come with maturity and experience and being with people whom I respect and who respect me. I feel like all of that makes a world of difference when you’re intimate with somebody. You don't have to be in a relationship but having trust with whomever you're sleeping with is nice. I feel like I'm in a better place when it comes to sex than I was when I first started having it. Thank God!

Jennifer’s relationship with masturbation and orgasms changed. Now, she believes that everyone should learn how to pleasure themselves.

I think I started masturbating pretty late in the game. I honestly wasn’t that interested and didn’t know how to, for most of my young life. I think I started masturbating when I was 15 or 16, so around the same time that I started having sex, like a little while before, but not a long time before. And I thought it was really fun and exciting. And I was surprised because, for a long time, I didn’t think that touching myself felt good. After all, I didn’t know what I was doing! So, reading stuff online, I slowly but surely figured out the process for making myself feel good and for orgasming. It became like a pretty regular activity for me later in high school. Even when I was dating people, I still liked to do it on my own time. I think it’s important for women to be comfortable with themselves and to be able to make themselves feel good and set time aside for yourself. I kind of see
masturbating and orgasming as a self-care activity because if you’re stressed out and having a bad day, you have something that you know will release a great flood of chemicals that will make you feel better and relax you! And I think a lot of girls feel a lot of shame and stigma about it, more so than guys do. So it’s really important for young women to kind of have resources to figure out what they like in safe ways.

Learning in College

Crystal, Amber, and Jennifer all enrolled in formal sexual education classes or joined sex-positive groups on their college campuses, “reacting” to the suppression of sexual information in high school. Not only did these activities help them to gain more information about sex, but it also helped to mitigate the taboo of sex. Enrolling in formal sexual education was a highly agentive act. Given little to no information about sex, students’ hunger for information did not cease; it grew. Furthermore, the act of enrolling in these courses demonstrates that these women’s desire to learn more about sex and sexuality went beyond mere curiosity; they exerted agency to find formal sexual education to combat the stigmas and shame they had inadvertently learned at Catholic school.

Crystal now takes an adult sex-ed course. Even now, she learns about sex through TV shows. Now, she does not feel guilty about having sex because she is married.

I take an outside course, a self-development thing. They actually had a whole thing on like sex in general, like the male perspective versus the female perspective, and they have like a Q&A with both genders like facing each other like asking each other questions like ‘hey what feels good for you?’ It was actually kind of wild and like everybody super enjoyed it because nobody talks about it openly like that. Face-to-face and everybody's watching, you know? So that's kind of my main source of learning and then of course like media and like TV shows. I just do whatever feels right now. I don't have to feel shame in it because I'm married. That was a big thing like I don't have to feel guilty anymore because I'm married. I don't have to worry.

Upon attending college, Amber joined sex-positive clubs on campus. She joined the Vagina Monologues troop her first year and held a sex toy party where she and her friends discussed
various sex toys and baked penis-shaped cookies. “That was the kind of thing that was like yeah, now I'm out of Catholic school, and I can talk about sex! I kind of had that moment where I was excited to do all of that stuff, and then the novelty of it kind of wore off, and I was just like, okay cool. Or even going to this college that was super liberal and gay and all of that, just to get something different.”

Jennifer enrolled in what she believes to be a comprehensive sexual education class. She found a community of other college students who went to Catholic school and felt as though they did not learn about sex.

It's embarrassing to have learned so little. I'm in, right now, a very comprehensive sex-ed class. It's kind of hilarious. It's a mix of women's studies and bio, so it's a cross-over class. And it's all about sex differences across the life cycle but through a women's studies and feminist-oriented lens. So we're talking about all of the stuff that I wish we had talked about in our high school sex ed, like about every STD and detailed descriptions of what they do and how you get them, and about sex education, and cancers that you can get, related to the reproductive systems. Just all kinds of really important stuff that is necessary for having safe sex. One of the questions we were asking group members was about our sex ed experiences, and a couple of people were either in a Catholic school or had Catholic backgrounds, and we all kind of turned to each other and were like, ‘Yeah, not a lot there. Just a lot of abstinence,’ and that was it for a lot of us. It was crazy to know how many people were missing out on important information.

Jennifer received help understanding more about gender and sexuality in her new sex-ed class.

Learning in more depth about female and male anatomy is cool to me. One thing that I think the Church does that this class doesn't do is it puts gender in binaries and opposition to one another. 'The female and male are extremely different and can't be reconciled.' But when you learn about anatomy and about how similar a lot of structures are, like the clitoris is like a tiny penis, just stuff like that is cool and helpful to know. It definitely is a helpful class, especially when it comes to STDs. I did not know that much about STDs. I've been tested before, but because I have had a pretty small number of sexual partners, it hasn't been a huge concern of mine. It is so interesting to have all of this information. My teacher is great because she's good at making topics that are difficult and uncomfortable for some people to feel natural. She welcomes discussions and debates.

One distinct difference between the sexual education we received at Saint Margaret’s and Jennifer’s new sexual education class is the welcoming of discussion and debate. Taking this
kind of biology-focused open sexual education marks not only Jennifer’s agency in resistance against Catholic patriarchal values but also the agency involved in conforming to contemporary mainstream ideas of sexuality.

**Relationships to Others and Themselves**

All of the collaborators on this project grew and matured in their relationships with others and themselves. Katherine used her time in college to discover more about herself and to think more critically about the Catholic ideology in which she was raised. Amber acknowledged that sexual repression had physically impacted her body and influenced her sexual desires. Jennifer learned from her past relationships to cultivate a healthier relationship with herself and her current boyfriend. The graduates are just beginning to exercise agency in their newly adult lives, in ways that conform and resist the norms in which we were all brought up.

Katherine would like to continue to be single and feels empowered through her current lifestyle.

This is the first time that I'm going to public school in college. I have not ever had sex, and I've never been in a relationship, and that is by choice. I am very okay – not even just okay – I love being single [a huge smile spreads across her face]. Beyond the sexual part of a relationship, just being free to spend my time how I want to and being uncommitted and like fully focused on school and friendships and realizing that if I do want to be in a relationship, I have the whole rest of my life to do that. In terms of sexuality, being in school, and seeing a lot of my close friends in relationships where sex is a pretty big part of the relationship. I obviously can't speak from experience, but seeing their experiences and their choices and having conversations with them has helped me to think more critically Theology of the Body and what I talked about with my parents growing up and realize that in my perspective and worldview especially as I've grown in my faith in college, really realizing that I don't know if I'll ever be over having my awesome, single-life existence. I'm content. If I ever am in a relationship, I do want to wait until I'm married to be like super sexually intimate with someone, and obviously like I have not had experience in a relationship that is physically intimate at all. My ethos and my mentality say, yes, I do want to wait until marriage so that I can not only give like my
whole intellect and personality and everything to someone but also to be able to give my sexuality along with that.

It seems that years after attending Saint Margaret’s, the concepts remain deeply ingrained in Katherine’s mind, as she uses the language from *Theology of the Body for Teens* to justify her decisions. Her visualization of giving her “whole intellect and personality and everything to someone” is reminiscent of the sexual “I” presented in *TOB for Teens*. Having sex becomes a giving of oneself, which my conversation with Katherine reminds us. At the same time, she reframes the choice as guided by her sense of independence and agency.

Amber identified as bisexual in high school and still identifies that way. “I had phases when I thought that Catholic school or all-girls school was the only reason I liked girls, but part of that is because I had a therapist who said, ‘When you go to college, you'll stop liking girls, it's fine.’” Amber convinced herself that she was only attracted to girls who looked like boys.

I had my first crush on a girl when I was 15. And she was like, a year older or whatever. And then I convinced myself that I liked her because she was boyish. She had short hair and stuff. So I was like, ‘I just like her because there are no boys around.’ And then my therapist was like, ‘Yeah! When you go to college, you'll probably only like boys.’ And I was like maybe? And then I went to college, and that's not what happened! She thought that just being exposed to more boys would focus me on boys, but I was like, but I already like boys too! Which is why it didn't make sense. The logic was off. I came out to my mom fast, within three or four months of having a crush on a girl. I would always overshare with my mom [laughing]. I was like, ‘Mom, I need to tell you about this! [laughing more].’ My dad is kind of homophobic in a weird way, so he didn't care, but he would have cared if I was a guy. My friends knew pretty early on. Our friend group knew I liked girls and guys. I think some of them knew. I can't remember whom I told. I think I just kind of assumed everyone knew, and when I ended up like with like my first kind-of girlfriend, I was like, hey here's this girl, I'm like- I don't know [laughing]. But I didn't do a big coming out or anything.

Amber believes she developed vaginismus because of her thinking that “sex was bad.”

I did have vaginismus for several years. I don't know if you know what that is. It's a condition that makes penetration extremely painful. So it was like even tampons, I couldn't wear tampons without it being excruciating. And I had it until I went to physical therapy for it about a year ago, um, where like a physical therapist relaxes your muscles a bunch and stuff and makes it easier. And no one knew what the cause of it is, but
sometimes it stems from trauma. I didn't experience any. Sometimes it stems from mental blocks. Sometimes it's like a muscular thing. She said it was probably a combo of muscles and like, mental blocks. So it could have been me thinking sex is bad, and you know, not realizing that I thought that. As well as muscles and things. But it's completely gone away now! With the help of physical therapy. I first noticed it when I was like 14, until age 20 or 19. But basically, I didn't notice until I tried to use tampons, and I was like, ‘This is awful!’ Like more awful than they say! But it was awesome to get diagnosed because I hear a lot of people don't find out until like way later. They think that everything is supposed to hurt. But I found out at like 18 or 19 that it's not supposed to hurt. And that I was able to kind of fix that. Because I didn't start having sexual encounters until like 18, and even with those, I basically would not let any penetration happen because it hurt too much. I was like, ‘No. Just no.’ But it didn't feel like it was mental at the time, but it would make sense looking back on it that it was influenced by that and by the Catholic school idea of it.

Amber developed rape fantasies because it would be the only way for her to enjoy sex without having initiated it.

Because I think it's the same reason I ended up at an early age getting into weird rape fantasies and stuff. Because it's like the absolving of fault. Where it's like, I'm getting laid, but it's not my fault [begins to laugh]. You know? That's kind of how I viewed it at the time. I don't have the kinks to the degree that I did when I was in high school, but I think it's because I was terrified of: if I lost my virginity of my own choice, it would be really bad. So it's like if it was someone else's fault, and I said no. I would still like it in my head. But it would be that I didn't have blame. And I think that's a really weird phenomenon that happens a lot when you're told you're not allowed to do this thing.

Amber posits that she may have developed sexual kinks because of all of the sexual repression at Saint Margaret’s.

Even like, someone might have a kink that they only have because something happened when they were younger, and they don't realize that until later. But yeah, I think that there's so much repression that happens in Catholic school that's just like, ‘Repress this desire! Repress! Repress everything!’ Um, that leads to acting out and to being into weird kinks. Not like weird kinks are bad. Hell yeah for weird kinks! [Laughing] But also, some of it is, I think, a direct cause of not being able to express in a normal way. So then, you have to express it in these other ways. And then you just end up there. Or at least, you have to find the answers! If you can find out about sex in a super healthy way and don't have to go to porn, then like maybe you're not exposed to weird kinks. But if porn is the way that you find out, that's like what you're starting with. And I think a lot of people, especially young boys, start watching porn from a really young age, getting informed entirely from that, which is not good.
Amber posits that she looked into ‘kinkier’ things because of the amount of sexual repression she built while attending Saint Margaret’s.

I think Saint Margaret's affected my sexuality in a bunch of ways, as far as like—both being sort of bisexual and also like, I think, sexual repression. Because it was not encouraged at all to be sexual, and I think that like that leads people to like try weirder things or like get into weirder things earlier. I feel like I looked into BDSM way earlier than I should have been looking into BDSM [chuckles]. But, I think [more laughter] that comes from when you're taught that everything is taboo, everything is taboo, so everything’s on the table! If something like vanilla sex is just as taboo as whatever the hell, then it's like, it's all fair game.

Amber’s fantasizing of BDSM (and other kinky acts) highlights the paradoxical effects of sexual repression. BDSM requires consent in a more explicit and sometimes even dangerously serious way than other situations, which may have made it the perfect fantasy for Amber to use to mitigate the taboo of sex in general.

Jennifer struggled with making male friends in college and felt unprepared to start dating. “For me, going into college, I felt like super unprepared to be dating or like even get to know guys just because I had been at Saint Margaret’s for all of my adolescent life, so navigating relationships with dudes just as friendships or as friends with benefits or anything was incredibly hard for me.” Although there seem to be many consequences for the Saint Margaret’s graduates from having received little information about sex and sexuality, their reflections on how the experience has shaped their relationships with others and themselves demonstrate a significant amount of introspection and growth.

**Loyalty to the School**

Although students have complicated relationships with the Saint Margaret’s education, they still feel a sense of loyalty to the school. In interviews, the students criticize the school, but
most times, endearingly or mildly. Additionally, they refer to the school always as one monolith, not a collection of actors and agents. The “school administration” is also made a subject, rather than a group of administrators. In this way, students unintentionally pardon those at the school and their mistakes. This pardoning may indicate complicated implications for how Saint Margaret’s graduates can come to terms with their expressions of agency.

Amber does not regret attending Saint Margaret’s and is not used to her newfound individuality.

[Looking back on the education] I don't regret any of it, I don't think I would have wanted to do anything differently, but it was wild, and I got an experience I couldn't have gotten anywhere else. And I think it taught me a lot as a result. I think that the education I received was also pretty good compared to a lot of what is in Hawaii, as far as school systems go. I think that socially, it's its own weird bubble. I'm not as good at picking out my own clothes because of having a uniform for so many years [laughing]. Sometimes I get overwhelmed, and I'm like I wish I had a uniform! I don't know what to put on! I feel like overall, wack, but enlightening. Would be my summary.

That Saint Margaret’s graduates exercise agency in ways that resist Catholic ideology while holding onto particular sentiments from their morality-based education bespeaks the complicated process of sexual learning. Even after these women have exited the Catholic school context, their journeys of learning more about their evolving identities, bodies, and relationships are riddled with difficult decisions that require each of them to practice agency in various ways. There is no one way to grapple with the issues to which Saint Margaret’s had introduced them. Yet, despite being subject to complicated morality-based sexual education, they rise to the challenge of coming to terms with their own senses of agency, be it in the form of conformity, resistance, or something in between.
Conclusion

Many of the students at Saint Margaret’s went to family members for information about sex before turning to other sources. Katherine and Amber detail their experiences of learning about sex and sexuality with their mothers. Katherine, Amber, and Jennifer used the internet to satisfy their curiosities. Paradoxically, it seems that abstinence-only education, rather than quelling students’ sexual desire, actually pushed students to want to learn more about sex via any resources available. I argue that the students’ early sexual experiences are an informal aspect of their sexual learning and thus constitute sex education. “Doing” sex then becomes a form of “learning sex” and a keystone of Saint Margaret’s self-curated sexual education. Crystal and Jennifer took the opportunity to reflect on their earliest experiences with sex and pleasure. Crystal, Amber, and Jennifer all enrolled in formal sexual education classes or joined sex-positive groups after high school. Not only did these activities help them to gain more information about sex, but it also helped to mitigate the taboo of sex. Katherine used her time in college to discover more about herself and to think more critically about the Catholic ideology in which she was raised. Amber acknowledged that sexual repression had physically impacted her body and influenced her sexual desires. Jennifer learned from her past relationships in order to cultivate a healthier relationship with herself and her current boyfriend.

In taking agentive steps to learn about sex upon departure from Catholic school, the Saint Margaret’s graduates highlight the inadequacy of morality-based sexual education and the paradoxical “reactance” that this restrictive kind of curriculum spurs. Despite students’ behavior seeming completely uniform in the context of Saint Margaret’s, once their previously hidden
experiences are brought to light, one finds that the Catholic school graduates’ self-curated sexual learning is strikingly diverse and agentive.
Conclusion

Readers will take away these three findings: 1) Catholic morality-based sexual education, as it is practiced now, is ineffective and paradoxical, 2) The way abstinence-only curriculums and the school environment approach the topic of sex is pushing students to do the bulk of their sexual learning outside of the classroom context, and 3) Setting up safe, nonjudgmental environments at school and home is as crucial for young people’s education and development as is formal sexual education. My hope is that graduates of Catholic school or abstinence-only programs know they are not alone in feeling confused about sex or having complicated feelings toward their bodies and desires. Teachers and administrators at Catholic schools should understand that by omitting sex-related information in curriculums, they compel students to learn in unregulated, unsupervised ways. If the student is lucky, she can rely on her close family for sex-related information, but even then, she will likely utilize the internet or other sources. On the internet, students can find all sorts of materials that will be more damaging (more vulgar, obscene, explicit, etc.) than these teachers can even imagine. Yet, the lack of sexuality-related information and the taboo surrounding sex at Catholic school paradoxically drives them to the internet and other unregulated sources. Teaching primarily about danger, additionally, is not a healthy approach to sexual education. If teachers intend to provide students with options for safe, healthy lifestyles, they need to be informing students not only about the dangers and risks of sex but also the joys and pleasures of sex.

Despite the virtuous intentions of the Saint Margaret’s teachers and administration, the inability of the school to allow for sexual exploration and agency had severe implications for women’s identities, bodies, and relationships. As I described in Chapters 1 and 2, the Saint
Margaret’s sexual education curriculum, in many ways, taught stigma and shame to the students, while making essentialist assumptions about gender and providing a strict sexual script for girls (e.g., teaching that abstinence is the only moral option for the expression of sexual agency outside of marriage). The resulting emotional, psychological, and physical consequences for Saint Margaret’s graduates is an injustice. Specifically, these consequences bespeak a violation of these women’s intimate justice.

The notion of intimate justice has been used to measure women’s sexual satisfaction and the sociopolitical factors that restrict their sexual agency. Sara McClelland uses an intimate justice framework to argue that sexual satisfaction is a crucial and oft-overlooked factor of inequality and to demonstrate that women “experience limited sexual rights in the socio-political domain because of their gender,” (2010, 663). Thus, she brings attention to the issue of justice in women’s intimate lives and paints a fuller picture of the patriarchal injustices that endanger women’s rights. Social stigma and other barriers contribute to intimate injustice for women, leading to gendered discrepancies in sexual entitlement, deservingness, and pleasure. By omitting lessons on sexual health and pleasure and instead emphasizing gendered purity ideals, the Saint Margaret’s theology curriculum exacerbated this intimate injustice, a “psychological clitoridectomy” on the students.19

In this project, I sought to prioritize the voices of my fellow graduates from all-girls Catholic school to give them the space to reflect on their sexual narratives. As I have outlined, the restrictive morality-based sexual education curriculum, alongside the surveillant environment at school, had enduring consequences for my informants’ sexual learning, paradoxically turning

them to other sources to learn about sex. However, I wish to acknowledge that the systems of power that govern the curriculum and the culture at Saint Margaret’s are not one simple, monolithic force of oppression.

My interviews with teachers, administrators, and nuns reveal a more nuanced picture of the value of and intentions behind Catholic education. In fact, the Saint Margaret’s faculty sincerely believe they are protecting girls against rampant secularism that would objectify them and their sexualities. As Saint Margaret’s is the last all-girls Catholic school in Hawaii, the teachers I interviewed described the mission of Catholic education with the language of a “voice crying out in the desert,” referring to a Biblical passage in which John the Baptist spreads the “word” of the Messiah (John 1:23). They envision themselves as the final stand against an omnipresent secular culture that would seek to destroy girls’ purity.

In my interview with Sister Mary and Sister Adna, graduates of Saint Margaret’s that went on to become nuns and eventually teachers at the school, Sister Mary discussed why they are passionate about upholding Catholic values in today’s world:

There was the figure of John the Baptist and when the people ask John, "John, what is your mission? What are you doing?" And he says, "I am a voice crying in the desert" and you know, that's why we are religious in today's world. We're a voice crying in the wilderness proclaiming that there is another way of living which is centered on Christ, that can bring peace, happiness, and joy to the world. And the message, of course, can be drowned out by others, but it's still the voice crying in the desert. We hope that the experience at [Saint Margaret’s] in some small way gives an experience of an alternative way of living that is based on unity and friendliness and sisterliness – you know, those are Christ's values.

Other teachers I interviewed also used the language of a “voice crying out in the desert” to explain why they believe Catholic education is a necessity and to justify the extensive theology programs at the school. From the teachers’ emic perspectives, they visualize the theology
curriculum and the doctrine at Saint Margaret’s not as the dominating ideology, but as the subordinate philosophy, buried under the forces of widespread secularism.

Additionally, the teachers use the language of “equipping” and “exposing” students to an alternative set of values because they believe that doing so cultivates well-rounded, moral women. Sister Mary believes her job is “sharing with students a set of values,” “planting seeds,” and “filling up a well with water.” Sister Adna also paints the picture of planting seeds of faith and spirituality:

For some students, [Saint Margaret’s] that’s your only experience of God. You know, they don’t have it in their family. The only time they step foot in the church is when they have Mass on campus. The only time they talk about God perhaps is in the classroom. For them, this is their only experience thereof. And so they can use it as a wellspring of reflection and perhaps down the road, sometime in the future, they may look upon it themselves and say, you know, I’m missing something, and maybe again revisit the importance of faith or a spiritual basis for their lives. But the seed is planted here.

Sister Mary adds that ultimately, it is the student’s choice if she wishes to practice Catholicism. She says, “whether you espouse those values as your own personal values, that is the student's choice. I think we see our job mostly as planting seeds or filling up a well with water, but what you do with the water and how the seeds grow is going to be dependent on the person, where she finds herself, and the choices that she makes.”

Similarly, Ms. Santos, the Head of the Theology at Saint Margaret’s who taught some of my theology classes, believes it is her responsibility to inform students of the Catholic way of life “so that you can make wise decisions in wherever you're going.” One of the central values that she believes Saint Margaret’s demonstrates is community. She believes even non-Catholic students are still part of the Church. “We're still all Church and no matter where you are, we share in one table, one family, one Eucharist. So that's been my difficulty, trying to instill those values.”
Meanwhile, Sister Adna believes that Saint Margaret’s empowers women by teaching them discipline and self-control. Her vision of agency is that Saint Margaret’s allows women to become more agentive through resilience and hard work.

[Saint Margaret’s girls have] a certain flavor of doing things, of getting things done despite the difficulties. And I think the girls always have had the message: you can be whatever you want to be but do it well. And do it to the best of your ability. I think that’s the agency we give them, that they can do whatever they set their hearts and minds out to do and to be. But do it well and do it with Grace.

Thus, the teachers and administrators demonstrate that they truly and fully believe in the power of Catholic education to uplift women. Furthermore, their framework of agency provides more context to why and how Saint Margaret’s continues to value and enforce Catholic ideology through the curriculum, policies, and general culture at the school.

That the Saint Margaret’s teachers and nuns were so open to meet with me to talk about the school’s curriculum and policies candidly demonstrates that they are eager to connect with students and graduates. Their openness also signals promising opportunities for Saint Margaret’s morality-based sexual education reform, or at least, the opening of conversations about sexual education, like the ones I had with them. Consequently, the righteous intentions of the Saint Margaret’s teachers and administrators reveal the complexity of providing sex education at an all-girls Catholic school.

Progressive changes to sexual education and the culture that encompasses such education require a more nuanced understanding of the definition of sexual education. Sexual education cannot be confined or designated to one class – morality-based or otherwise – because sexual learning is a life-long activity that constantly evolves alongside individuals’ changing relationships to their bodies, to their identities, and to others. Our broader culture finds itself in
need of a new model of sexual education that acknowledges and supports women’s sexual agency in all forms – conformity to the dominating systems, resistance, and beyond.
Bibliography


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