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Gender performance in "cult" conversion narratives: the Twelve Tribes

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Gender Performance in "Cult" Conversion Narratives: The Twelve Tribes

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<u>Dedication</u>

To Dr. Palmer: you have made of me a perpetual student. I will never take for granted the passion you have instilled in me to understand words in their puzzling perfection. Thank you.

To Dr. Beech: your intelligence and humor inspire me. I am incredibly lucky to know you as a teacher and purveyor of incredible wit. Thank you.

To Nathan: without you, there would never be a word on these pages. Your faith in my ability keeps me driven, and I'm lucky to know you. Thank you.

To Lewis: your meows of encouragement are invaluable; I dread to imagine where I'd be without a sassy cat like you. Thank you.

Abstract

While many scholars have attempted to understand the unique contours of the definition of "cult," there are still rampant disagreements across different disciplines and scholarly persuasions about the way that a "cult" functions differently than other organizations. In this essay, I aim to clarify how the function of a "cult" is contingent upon a set of rhetorical strategies used by the group to systematically remove agency from group members. One of those rhetorical strategies is compelling individuals to perform according to strict heteronormative gender enactments. To understand how this strategy works, I will turn to four spiritually metanoic narratives published by the Twelve Tribes, an aberrant religious organization that exercises identity control over their members and analyze them through the theoretical lenses of gender performance, spiritual metanoia, and identification/consubstantiality.

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Introduction

The sensationalized "cult" narrative is not a new one; the public's interest in brainwashing, mind-control, and charismatic leaders has been rampant since the Tate-LaBianca murders perpetrated by the Manson Family in the late 1960s,[1] and continues today with cases like the NXIVM sex trafficking and self-help organization, whose leader was sentenced to prison in 2018.[2] Neither of these organizations considered themselves to be religious, and both of these groups have been called, both by former members and in major media coverage, "cults." This coverage, particularly coverage that emphasizes sensationalized narratives of sexual abuse and violence, rhetorically shapes public perceptions about "cults."

Because of this negative rhetorical shaping of public perception, an academic divide has emerged between those who believe that the pejorative title of "cult" limits groups who are given the title unfairly and should be referred to with more neutral terminology (like "new religious movement") and those who believe the term "cult" to be a proper tool in discussing particular patterns of behavior between the group and individuals.[3] This divide has limited the discourse between these two scholarly persuasions that could be advanced about the power, authority, and removal of agency that is unique to the groups themselves. While I believe that the term "cult" can be useful in academic discourse, I believe that it should be used only when a group's leadership effectively removes agency from individual group members. In the case of the Twelve

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[1]"Manson Family Murders Fast Facts," CNN.com, September 30, 2013, https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/30/us/manson-family-murders-fast-facts.

[2]Carla Correa, "A Timeline of the Nxivm Sex Cult Case," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2020, sec. New York, https://www.nytimes.com/article/nxivm-timeline.html.

[3]Benjamin Zablocki, *Misunderstanding Cults*, ed. Thomas Robbins (University of Toronto Press, 2001), https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442677302.

Tribes, the group that I have chosen to analyze, that removal of agency is intimately tied to the group's expectations about gender and how it should and must be enacted.

This paper will use key concepts in rhetorical analysis to dissect the recruitment-oriented conversion (spiritually metanoic) narratives of current group members, and how these narratives both establish consubstantiality with potential recruits by attempting to connect the ideals of the group to the ideals of the reader and also establish the group's beliefs and ideals about appropriate and expected gender enactments. I argue that these expected gender enactments are uniquely rhetorical constructions. While I am of the belief that these recruitment-focused narratives are not uniquely adept at persuading potential recruits to join the organization,[4] at least relative to any other recruitment-focused organization, the discussion of the sacrifice of personal agency in these texts highlights the potential differences between the religious organization and the "cult." Furthermore, I will assert that the expectations of gender enactment further limit the agency of the individual group member, and the performances of the group's gender ideals present in these narratives aim to both familiarize the potential recruit with how their gender must be enacted and with how the sacrifice of their personal identity in favor of the group's identity would be beneficial to them. To support my hypothesis, I will turn to the gendered conversion narratives of the Twelve Tribes, a religious community that has been frequently labeled as a "cult."[5]

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[4] Annabelle Mooney, "Is 'Cult' Language Distinctive?," in *The Rhetoric of Religious "Cults"* (Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks, 2005), 129–54, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230504417_6.

[5] "Inside the CUI's Investigation of the Yellow Deli That Uncovered Its Connection to Cult-like Behavior and Child Abuse," CU Independent, December 12, 2019, https://www.cuindependent.com/2019/12/11/twelve-tribes-cui-investigation/; Beverley Hadgraft, "What Is It like in the Twelve Tribes Community Cult?," Now to Love, October 18, 2018, https://www.nowtolove.com.au/news/real-life/twelve-tribes-cult-51635; among others.

Exigence and Group Background

The Twelve Tribes originated in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The group was formed by the late charismatic founder Eugene Spriggs (referred to group members by his group-appointed Hebrew name Yoneq) who reported being asked, through a vision from God, "Is this why I made you?"[6] This vision inspired Spriggs to found the organization, which has been active since 1973.[7] To ensure the continued influence of the group, the Twelve Tribes, guided by Spriggs' original vision, continues to use a variety of rhetorical forms, genres, and practices to persuade potential members to join the group. Though this paper will focus on the recruitment-focused testimonial narratives, they also use street proselytizing, eccentric decor, music, and food to help potential recruits identify with the group's projected message of fulfillment and peace.

Though Spriggs was living in California during his first described vision, the article from the group's official website titled "The Restoration of All Things" states that "He had heard that the Rocky Mountains were full of people who had dropped out of traditional lifestyles and were trying to find peace."[8]Spriggs was also born and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and graduated from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; his history in the city likely also influenced his decision to begin ministering to Chattanooga locals. According to the "Our History" page of the

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[6]Twelve Tribes, "The Restoration of All Things," twelvetribes.org, January 14, 2021, https://twelvetribes.org/article/restoration-all-things.

[7]Susan J. Palmer, "The Twelve Tribes: Preparing the Bride for Yahshua's Return," *Nova Religio* 13, no. 3 (February 1, 2010): 59–80, https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2010.13.3.59.

[8]Twelve Tribes, "Restoration of All Things."

Twelve Tribes' website, the organization was founded in the 70's as a result of the growing Jesus

People Movement.[9]

The Jesus People Movement, or the Jesus Movement, first appeared during the social,

religious, and political turbulence of the late 1960's.[10] The movement "synthesized features of

the counterculture with the Christian faith,"[11] appealing both to spiritual seekers within the hippie

counterculture and Christians who, while appreciating aspects of the peace-focused hippie

movement, were dissatisfied with the period's pronounced sexual promiscuity and drug culture.

The theology of the movement is described as a "blend of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism,"[12]

though there is no explicit defining trait of the movement's theology because of the widespread

diffusion of the movement's core ideals across many different groups. However, the

reinterpretation and reintegration of Christian ideals from a young, countercultural lens allowed

for the Christian beliefs of the previous generation to appeal to young people who were drawn to

the hippie lifestyle. The Jesus People Movement also incorporated the sound of popular music,

which was considered amongst the dominant Christian culture at the time to be antithetical to

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[9]Twelve Tribes, "Our History," twelvetribes.org, accessed October 23, 2023, https://twelvetribes.org/whoweare/ourhistory.

[10]"What Was the Jesus People Movement?," Jesus People Movement Oral History, August 9, 2020, https://jesuspeoplemovement.com/what-was-the-jesus-people-movement/. This archive provides background information as well as a number of primary source documents and interviews relating to the movement. This project is result of a partnership between Wheaton College's Billy Graham Center and the Study of the Work and Ministry of the Holy Spirit Today. There is no easily identifiable mention of the Twelve Tribes on any of the site's primary pages, which suggests a conflict between the Twelve Tribes' claims to connection with the movement and the historical documentation of the movement's influence.

[11]Jesus People Movement Oral History, August 9, 2020, https://jesuspeoplemovement.com/what-was-the-jesus-people-movement/.

[12]Jesus People Movement Oral History.

Christian values, into songs with Christian lyrics.[13] The movement focused itself on

street-proselytizing directed at young people, concerning itself primarily with eschatology, or

"the last judgment and resurrection,"[14] as the sense of urgency in converting allowed the

movement to "cultivate a sense of urgency not only into a decision for faith but a commitment of

believers to reach the lost."[15]

Similarly, an article in the Twelve Tribes' *Freepaper* titled "Chattanooga: Do You

Remember" declares that founder Eugene Spriggs and his wife, Marsha, "run several houses for

young people who are runaways, mixed-up, or for some reason displaced."[16] This article,

published in the Spring of 2006, describes the origins of the Yellow Deli, the group's primary

tool for recruiting new members. While Spriggs asserts that the inciting moment for the shift

from mainstream Christianity to the creation of the Twelve Tribes took place in 1975, the first

deli was opened in 1972, "shortly after [Marsha and Eugene] became Christians."[17] These delis,

including the current location in the founding city of Chattanooga, Tennessee, are often on

college campuses. Like other organizations that consider themselves parts of the Jesus People

Movement, street proselytizing and a doctrine primarily concerning eschatology are key

components of the group's larger rhetorical strategy. Also like groups under the umbrella of the

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[13]Andrew MacDonald and Ed Stetzer, "The Lasting Legacy of the Jesus People," Talbot Magazine - Biola University Blogs, June 17, 2020, https://www.biola.edu/blogs/talbot-magazine/2020/the-lasting-legacy-of-the-jesus-people.
[14]"Eschatology," Oxford Reference, 2023, https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095757663.

[15]MacDonald and Stetzer, "Lasting Legacy."

[16]Twelve Tribes, "Chattanooga - Do You Remember?" twelvetribes.org, 2006, https://twelvetribes.org/publication/chattanooga-do-you-remember.

[17]Twelve Tribes, "Chattanooga - Do You Remember?"

Jesus People Movement, the Twelve Tribes continues to target young people drawn to the

remnants of the hippie counterculture present today.

This proselytizing takes place in many forms, but a notable one is their bus, the

Peacemaker, originally used to offer "free cookies and tea, a peaceful place to spend some time,

free medical care pulling glass out of people's feet when they got hurt"[18] at Grateful Dead

concerts. Today, the Twelve Tribes continues to recruit at concerts, "looking for the 'seekers' at

whatever place we could find, whatever musician seemed to touch the deep place in people's

hearts." This emphasis on spiritual seeking is present throughout many of the Twelve Tribes'

publications and in the following case studies. Furthermore, spiritual seeking, as described by

these case studies, is expected to take different forms based on expectations of gender enactment.

It is important to assert that, while I am examining texts published by the Twelve Tribes

designed to boost recruitment, these texts do not exist in the vacuum of rhetorical analysis.

Rather, the lives of real people are affected by the rhetorical gendered ideals predicated by the

group and in these texts. Some scholars, particularly those using the lens of the universal "new

religious movement," discredit the individuals who have described leaving these groups, yet

"often accept accounts from current members as being acceptable sources of information on the

group."[19] The extent to which the men and women of the Twelve Tribes suffer from their divisive

gender ideology can be understood only by those who were and are intimately involved in the

group. Researchers, regardless of their fields of study, will never be able to fully understand what

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[18] Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer," twelvetribes.org, February 21, 2021,
https://twelvetribes.org/article/redeemer. (In this case study which I will later elaborate on, the
author states that he had met the Twelve Tribes originally at a music festival, and had "stayed in
touch with them over the last few years." This narrative, while suggesting the importance of the
Twelve Tribes' religious doctrine, is also a testament to the effectiveness of their concert
proselytizing.)

[19] Marybeth F Ayella, "'They Must Be Crazy,'" *American Behavioral Scientist* 33, no. 5
(May 1, 1990): 567, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764290033005005.

the benefits and detriments are of being intimately involved in a cult-like organization. However, to understand how the discursive affects the physical, we must assume that the imposition of a gendered narrative onto physical bodies is a *result* of discourse and that these two spheres are hardly, if ever, distinct. There cannot be one without the other– physical manifestations of power are simply the results of discourse that must also be understood through discourse.[20] Despite my analysis of these texts, this work will not inform the group's change in ideology or expectations of how one's gender within the group is to be performed. However, one may hope to better understand the intimate ties between gender, power, and performance within high-control groups, and how these are residues of discourse rather than results of physical or intellectual differences.

Additionally, the Twelve Tribes does not exist in a vacuum; while considered an aberrant sect of Christianity, its influences can be traced to particular religious movements like the Jesus People Movement[21] and Messianic Judaism, "a Biblically based movement of people who, as committed Jews, believe in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Jewish Messiah of Israel of whom the Jewish Law and Prophets spoke"[22]. While it is out of the scope of this paper to discuss where the Twelve Tribes are situated among their peer religious organizations, their influence is not singularly drawing from the group's specific ideologies. Rather, the group's doctrine mixes the old (Biblical language, recognizable Christian movements of the past) with the new (the group's specific

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[20]Dennis K Mumby and Karen Lee Ashcraft, *Reworking Gender: A Feminist Communicology of Organization* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2004), 1–30, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452229461.

[21]Twelve Tribes, "Why She Didn't Fly - Jesus Movement of the 70'S, Part 1," Twelvetribes.org, 2003, https://twelvetribes.org/publication/why-she-didnt-fly-jesus-movement-70s-part-1.

[22]Messianic Jewish Alliance of America, "Messianic Movement," MJAA, April 27, 2023, https://mjaa.org/messianic-movement/.

doctrines and ideologies) to appeal to a broader, more varied audience and establish consubstantiality.

Outline

The first section of my thesis will review the scholarly conversation within which I situate my analysis, drawn from work in the fields of rhetoric, gender studies, and cultic studies. First, I will include my interpretations of gendered rhetoric as advanced by many scholars, but with particular attention paid to Judith Butler's theory of gender performance in their book *Gender Trouble* and Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Mary Domenico's analyses of gender enactment within narratives in their book *Gender Stories: Negotiating Identity in a Binary World*. Second, I will turn to the ambiguous definition of "cult" and assert my interpretation of a "cult" as a group that uses rhetorical strategies to limit the agency of individual group members. I will then turn to Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* to explain how the group establishes a shared, or consubstantial, identity with potential recruits and how this consubstantial identity limits individuals' ability to uniquely perform their gender. Finally, I will turn to Adam Ellwanger's *Metanoia: Rhetoric, Authenticity, and the Transformation of the Self* to dissect the genre of the spiritual conversion narrative and understand how the conventions of this genre apply to my case studies.

Drawing from the literature discussed in the first section, the subsequent analysis examines four narratives of spiritual metanoia published on the Twelve Tribes' website, specifically two from women and two from men. These analyses explore gender performance in the pre-metanoic sections to interpret how the self-censuring of pre-group gender performance aligns with the group's strict gender ideals. The discussion extends to the establishment of consubstantiality in the post-metanoic sections of each case study, along with the codification of

gender expectations as the authors describe how their involvement with the group has affected them. In the conclusion, the study explores gender expression differences in the women's and men's narratives and how cult rhetoric effectively centers around the removal of individual purpose in favor of a consubstantial group identity.

Section 1: Literature Review

Gender

Rhetoric in gender studies addresses how the dynamics and socio-cultural understandings and expectations of gender contribute to rhetorical performances, constructions, and interactions. Scholars who pay special attention to the way that gender functions rhetorically have attempted to explain "problems relating to gendered norms and representations as contexts, conditions, and functions for rhetoric."[23]Though the methods of this inquiry into the subject of gender rhetoric vary greatly,[24]all theories advanced in this field focus on how gender is constructed and enacted. In my exploration of these gendered narratives, I must address my conceptualization of gender and how it is a rhetorical and performative construction. To those who believe that gender equivocates biological sex, gender is not boiled down to the aspects of its performance or the "assignment of meaning to bodies,"[25] but rather asserts that "femaleness and maleness are seen

[23]Joan Faber McAlister, "Gender in Rhetorical Theory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, November 29, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.75.

[24]Jane Donawerth, "Bibliography of Women and the History of Rhetorical Theory to 1900," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1990): 403–14, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3885618.

[25]Sonja K Foss, Karen A Foss, and Mary E Domenico, *Gender Stories: Negotiating Identity in a Binary World,* 8 (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, Inc, 2013).

as essences that are constant and unchanging across cultures, geographic locations, and historical time periods."[26]

If one considers biological sex to be the only factor that makes something "gendered," one must ignore that, in the last few years, the conversation around gender has dramatically changed both in academia and in the general public to include and legitimize identities of individuals who self-identify as transgender, nonbinary, genderfluid, and others. As rhetorical theorist Karen Foss states, after removing the constraints of mutually constitutive definitions of sex and gender, "there are many ways to become feminine or masculine because there is no precise correlation among sex, sexual orientation or preference, and gender."[27] Humans, however, as they make sense of the symbols and systems of symbols that create gender, make it impossible for one's personal identity to correlate with the way they are gendered. Because our definition of gender does not see gender as a stable and unchanging aspect of someone's life but rather sees it as a set of partcultures, or multiple and interrelated identity groups that make up a person's conceptualization of self, the symbols that signify gender and its expression are different from person to person. Furthermore, gender is expected to exist within the prescribed gender binary of male and female, with any representations of gender outside of that binary falling under an umbrella of supposed sexual deviance. Because the Twelve Tribes, with its roots in Biblical fundamentalism, believe gender and sex to be mutually constitutive as well as binary, I will be addressing the conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity in the following case studies in binary terms. However, instead of using the terms "male" and "female," as they imply a correlative link between gender and biology, I will be using the terms "woman" and "man." While these terms are gender-specific, they are not sex-specific. There is nothing chromosomal

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[26]Foss, *Gender Stories,* 6-7
[27]Foss, *Gender Stories,* 7.

about a woman, neither is there something chromosomal about a man. Rather the two terms, while still prescribing to binary gender expectations, refer to the enactment of gender and the assumption of gender identity based on a system of symbols and representations.

In the context of the "gendered" conversion narrative of a Christian high-control group, it is important to note the expectations around the enactment of gender from women and men, and what agencies they are deprived of enacting because of the strict binary understanding of gender expression. Agency, which theorist Kenneth Burke notably defines in his dramatistic pentad as being intimately tied with pragmatism and representing the methods one uses to act,[28] and agency as a rhetorical strategy has henceforth appeared in many areas of rhetorical scholarship, including in the intersection of gender and rhetorical construction. Agency, or what modern gender rhetoric theorists understand as "the capacity to act or make a difference,"[29] is simply complex verbiage for the ability to act according to one's own beliefs and upon the things that are the most important to them. In the context of a high-control group such as the Twelve Tribes, agency is completely removed from the individual, homogenizing their ideals with the group's to create and enforce a strict group-oriented ideology. The issue that must be addressed, then, is which symbols are assigned meaning in these narratives as belonging to men and women and what the purpose is in the context of initiating and familiarizing potential recruits with the strict ideals of the group. Furthermore, the larger purpose of this work is to discuss how these narratives shape agency in terms of individual gender identification. The process of establishing identification, particularly in the case of the Twelve Tribes, removes agency from individual

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[28]Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), 275–317.

[29]Foss, *Gender Stories,* 16.

group members in favor of a group identity, based largely on reductive and limiting stratification of gender identity.

Because this analysis is not about individual women's experiences in the Twelve Tribes, or even how effective these materials might be at recruiting members, but rather the gender constructions presented in these specific metanoic[30] narratives, the distinction must be made between the individual women and women as a category. As gender theorist Judith Butler posits, the Western conceptions of "womanhood" are frequently assumed to be consistent across all cultures, races, and experiences. While tackling the racialized gendered expectations in the Twelve Tribes is outside of the scope of this paper, it would be negligent not to acknowledge how conceptions of womanhood, both inside and outside of the group, vary between individuals. Gender identities are created based on gender expectations, which change throughout one's life as a result of the ever-evolving expectations of gender enactment. Individuals who are not a part of the group are encouraged to enact their gender differently across the many different cultural subsections that make up their understanding of gender enactments from which they can then identify their preferred performances; they can assess the expectations of how their gender must be performed and "change yourself or the external environment in ways that align more with how you want yourself and the world to be."[31] However, within the circumstances of strict environments like the Twelve Tribes, gender identity takes a completely different form than it does in less restrictive environments– even the American South maintains less divisive expectations of proper gender enactment than the group.

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[30]Adam Ellwanger, *Metanoia* (Penn State Press, 2020), 5, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utc-ebooks/reader.action?docID=6224821&query=.

[31]Foss, *Gender Stories*, 24-25.

The concept of a universal womanhood to advance feminist discourse ultimately creates further division between groups of women who are unaccounted for in this supposed universality; "These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes."[32] It is important to understand gender as a set of social constructions, as well as to understand the assumption of a universal patriarchy as a self-defeating construction. To dissect and identify the rhetorical moves made by the following case studies, we must understand that these moves prescribe to several expectations of the enactment of gender by the individuals who composed these narratives and that these expectations remove agency from the individuals not because they are necessarily synonymous with a universal patriarchy, but because they are results of both expectations of gender enactment inherent to the individual member and of the group.

Gender binarism is not inherent to the analysis of gender. Instead, it is inherent to the universal standard on which that analysis is predicated. Because of the heteronormative gender constraints within which analysis is expected to operate, the discussion of enactments of gender are thereby constrained into binary terms. There can be no in-depth analysis of gendered rhetorical strategies without also acknowledging the firm constraints within which gender is expected to be enacted. There can also be no in-depth analysis of these case studies without the acknowledgment of the difference in expectations of gender enactment of the women within the group and those outside of it.

Because this analysis is not about individual women's experiences in the Twelve Tribes but rather the gender constructions presented in these specific metanoic narratives, the distinction must be made between the individual women and women as a category. As gender theorist Judith

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[32]Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 6.

Butler posits, the Western conceptions of "womanhood" are frequently assumed to be consistent across all cultures, races, and experiences.[33] While tackling the racialized gendered expectations in the Twelve Tribes is outside of the scope of this paper, it would be negligent not to acknowledge how conceptions of womanhood, both inside and outside of the group, vary between individuals. Foss asserts that "gender identities are created within circumstances where there can be expectations and disagreements about the forms that they take."[34] Thus, within the circumstances of strict environments like the Twelve Tribes, gender identity takes a completely different form than it does in America; even the American South maintains different expectations of members than the group.

Furthermore, the concept of a universal womanhood to advance feminist discourse ultimately creates further division between groups of women who are unaccounted for in this supposed universality, as "These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes."[35] It is important, for this analysis, to see gender as a set of social constructions, as well as to accept that the assumption of a universal patriarchy is a self-defeating construction. To dissect and identify the rhetorical moves made by the following case studies, we must understand that these moves prescribe to several expectations of the enactment of gender by the individuals who composed these narratives and that these expectations remove agency from the individuals not because they are necessarily synonymous with a universal patriarchy, but because they are results of both expectations of gender enactment inherent to the individual member and of the group.

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[33]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 5.

[34]Foss, *Gender Stories*, 15.

[35]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6

Gender binarism is not inherent to the analysis of gender. Instead, it is inherent to the universal standard on which that analysis is predicated. Because of the gender constraints within which analysis is expected to operate, the discussion of enactments of gender is thereby constrained into binary terms. There can be no in-depth analysis of gendered rhetorical strategies without also acknowledging the firm constraints within which gender is expected to be enacted. There can also be no in-depth analysis of these case studies without the acknowledgment of the difference in expectations of gender enactment of the women within the group and those outside of it.

Throughout my analysis, I will frequently refer to gender as performance; a construction rhetorically shaped by cultural and ideological forces. While this can be understood literally because of the performative aspect of a recruitment-focused narrative, gender enactments, even interpersonal ones, can be understood as performance. Butler posits that the enactments of gender, based on the cultural, social, and political landscapes that have influenced an individual, resemble elements of the theatrical performance.[36] She insists that one does not simply inhabit a body, but also *does* a body; "In other words, the body is a historical situation… and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation."[37] Gender performances affect both our conceptions of self and others' conceptions of us. For example, seeing someone who would, based on biological sex, be considered male with long hair is considered "feminine"-- this is a subversion of the expectations of gender performance. Going even further, one who identifies as

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[36]Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 521, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893.

[37]Butler, "Performative Acts," 521.

"non-binary" may reject the performance of either femininity or masculinity, thus destabilizing their own and, likely, others' expectations of their gender enactment.

The group's ability to remove agency, or "the capacity to act or make a difference,"[38] over individuals' gender enactments is contingent upon the group's ability to convince members of their alignment with their values. Though the Twelve Tribes, just like any other group, is incapable of completely aligning themselves with each member's values, they can effectively convince members otherwise by establishing a consubstantial identity.[39]

Defining "Cult": An Argument Against the Unconditional Labeling of Aberrant Groups as "New Religious Movements"

The term "cult" will be used throughout this analysis. It is important to note that the Twelve Tribes have, across several media coverages of the group's ideology, been referred to as a cult.[40]While some scholars have advanced terminological alternatives, the term "cult" should not be altogether dismissed. The most commonly used alternative is that of the "new religious movement;" the use of the "cult" label should not discount the validity of the new religious movement, and rather should act to highlight the differences between the two terms. The academic divide between the two camps of academics studying new religious movements (the

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[38]Foss, *Gender Stories,* 16.

[39]Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 21.

[40] See: Shelly Bradbury, "'They Are Evil': Ex-Twelve Tribes Members Describe Child Abuse, Control inside Religious Cult," The Denver Post (The Denver Post, March 3, 2022), https://www.denverpost.com/2022/03/03/twelve-tribes-cult-child-abuse/; Brendan Joel Kelley, "Into Darkness," Southern Poverty Law Center, August 5, 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2018/darkness. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2018/darkness; Shelly Bradbury, "Twelve Tribes: A Black Father's Struggle to Pull His Child from the Racist Cult," The Mercury News (The Mercury News, March 8, 2022), https://www.mercurynews.com/2022/03/08/twelve-tribes-cult-racist-colorado-fire/; to name a few.

"cult apologists" and the "cult-bashers"[41]) does not allow for the advancement of the dialogue between these two groups, thus limiting the progression of these studies into a necessarily objective grey area. While the "cult apologists" tend to rely on the "new religious movement" as a blanket term for all religious organizations considered to be both new and outside of the accepted mainstream, the "cult-bashers" rely on the word "cult" as a pejorative term to demonstrate the potentially harmful effects that aberrant religious organizations can have on their members. The term "cult," used ideally, would not connote a set of abstract and negative emotional claims but rather would be seen as a tool with practical applications in understanding the unique and demanding set of structures under which members are expected to perform. The term "cult" should not be labeled strictly as an opinionated claim, but rather should provide a concrete way to analyze the unique structures of the high-demand organization.

While I do agree that the term "cult" is used often in a pejorative sense, and somewhat agree that "if one cannot use a term consistently in its denotative sense, it should be not be used at all,"[42] the dismissal of the term's unique rhetorical weight amongst the other terms that have been advanced as alternatives would be detrimental to a complete analysis of these texts. I agree that groups like the Twelve Tribes are not, as rhetoric scholar Annabelle Mooney posits, uniquely persuasive in their recruitment-focused written materials as opposed to other recruitment-focused organizations.[43] However, I disagree with Mooney's claim that, in joining and sacrificing significant elements of one's life for the high-demand or "cultic" organization "the sacrifices… differ only in kind from sacrifices people make for career, relationships and other pursuits."[44]

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[41]Zablocki, *Misunderstanding Cults*.

[42]Annabelle Mooney, *The Rhetoric of Religious "Cults"* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

[43]Mooney, *Rhetoric Religious "Cults,"* 2.

[44]Mooney, *Rhetoric Religious "Cults,"* 2.

The obfuscation of the complete truth is indeed not singular to "cult" recruitment, but recruitment-focused materials are often not the most important factors in successful cult recruitment. The difference between the "cult" and other recruitment-focused organizations, both religious and non-religious, is the removal of personal agency.

To join a group, one must agree to simply be part of the group's identity but particularly must agree to give up their sense of personal agency in favor of identifying with the group.[45] In the case of the Twelve Tribes, Eugene Spriggs, the group's charismatic founder, is no longer living. However, the power held by individuals in authority over group members still prevents members from leaving the group with ease.[46] The difference between a legitimate new religion and a "cult" does not come only from public interpretation or a refusal to accept any difference in religious expression, but rather must exert control over individual group members that makes mandatory the sacrifice of personal agency. The "cult" is not simply a religious movement that deviates from the norm, but is a group that has some sort of totalizing control over its members. While it is true that "the analysis of texts is not about judging the 'worthiness' of the group to inspire faith," this is not the move I am attempting to make in analyzing the way these materials are structured. [47] Rather, I am attempting to dissect these narratives and what they highlight as

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[45]Harvey Whitehouse, "Dying for the Group: Towards a General Theory of Extreme Self-Sacrifice," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 41 (January 1, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x18000249; An interesting argument is advanced by this scholar that personal agency is actually amplified in a group that requires extreme self-sacrifice, and that that sense of enhanced personal agency is motivated by a feeling of one with the group, or, as it is referred to in this text, experiencing "fusion" With the group. Though I feel that the basic tenants of this theoretical framework are encompassed in Burke's theory of consubstantiality, I do think that the theory advanced by Whitehouse poses unique questions and points about the topic of extreme self-sacrifice.

[46]See: Benjamin Zablocki, "Exit Cost Analysis: A New Approach to the Scientific Study of Brainwashing," *Nova Religio* 1, no. 2 (April 1, 1998): 216–49, https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.1998.1.2.216; Analysis of "costs" of leaving a group, or "exit costs."

[47]Mooney, *Rhetoric Religious "Cults,"* 4.

being attractive to the group (particularly how they highlight different aspects in women's and men's conversion narratives), and how these moves are uniquely made through their recruitment-based narratives.

Although I am in favor of using the term "cult" as a diagnostic tool, it would be irresponsible to refuse to acknowledge that, because of its connotative nature, popular usage of the word "cult" has limited the capability of a more historical and practical use of the word from all types of writing.[48] However negative the connotation of the word, and despite popular and media associations with its implications, there has not been another term advanced that has been universally understood for the particular agency removal that occurs in these groups. Furthermore, the inability to restrict the word's definition is not singular to this line of study; there are connotative and imprecise definitions used across many lines of scholarly inquiry. In fact, the term "new religious movement," one of the most frequently used substitutes for the term "cult," comes with its own definitional ambiguity, as the term "new" is imprecise and must be relatively defined.[49] Scholar of cultic studies Michael Langone posits that there are three ways to deal with the definitional ambiguity of words like "cult":

1. We can pretend that a particular term (e.g., cult) is more precise than it actually is, thereby inviting misapplication of the concept to which the term refers.

2. We can so narrowly define the term that it becomes useless in a practical sense.

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[48]James T Richardson, "Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative," *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (1993): 348–56, https://doi.org/10.2307/3511972.

[49]Tina Rodia, "Is It a Cult, or a New Religious Movement?," Penn Today, August 26, 2019, https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/it-cult-or-new-religious-movement#:~:text=Cult%20is%20a%20term%20that. Note that the term "new religious movement" is designated to be used for religious organizations formed from the 19th century onwards.

3. We can strive for a practical level of precision while acknowledging the
    unavoidable ambiguity in our terminology.[50]

Because narrowly redefining the term is both impractical and impossible, as the popular use of the term will likely not be constrained by any scholar's attempt at redefinition, there must be particular attention paid to the term and its unavoidable ambiguity but also a precise and exacting body of evidence to support its denotative use.

A term like "abusive," or "extremist," for example, is connotative, but can be easily supported by the evidence used to advance its use rhetorically. Because of the fuzzy definition, there is little meaning to using the word without a concrete defense of its use. While the technical definition of "cult" is "a small group of people who have extreme religious beliefs and who are not part of any established religion," this understanding of "cults" limits academic discourse.[51] This definition fails to account for the extreme differences between "cults" and other religious groups and also fails to take into account the agency removed from individual group members by group authorities. While I do not believe it is possible to remove the pejorative connotations of the word "cult," it is necessary to note the unique weight of the word juxtaposed with the potentially overrestricted terms advanced to replace it to date. The claims that there might be a word to capture every facet of "cultic" behavior whilst still maintaining a non-pejorative status may bear weight, but the suggestion that the same term would be used across as many different fields of study and as many popular outlets is, at least up to this point, unsupported by the available research. Many scholars, like Mooney, the rhetoric scholar mentioned above who

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[50]Michael Langone, "The Definitional Ambiguity of Cult and ICSA's Mission," *ICSA Today* 6, no. 3 (2015): 6–7.
    [51]"Cult (Noun)," in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, accessed October 23, 2023, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/cult_1#:~:text=a%20small%20group%20of%20people,part%20of%20any%20established%20religion.

suggested that the connotative status of the term was unfairly misused and otherwise

unproductive, have attempted to provide an alternative term for groups popularly deemed as

"cults" and been unsuccessful beyond their own scope of research.[52] I will not attempt to provide

a comprehensive definition or alternative to the word "cult" in this paper; rather, I will attempt to

deconstruct why I believe this group's rhetoric revolves around the removal of agency and

individualism, benefitting primarily, if not only, the group. In my understanding of "cults," these

characteristics are often central to the unique strategies of initiating and maintaining control over

members. I will not be discussing this concept from the belief that these groups are manipulative

only because of their uniquely hypnotic recruitment materials; to do so would be to ignore much

of the purpose of this analysis. Instead, I will be examining how the different expectations of

gender enactment in these materials support the supposed benefits of relinquishing agency and

personal identity in favor of a unidimensional group identity.

Identification and Consubstantiality

Identification, according to rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke, can be best summed up by

the following: "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined,

A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify* himself with B even when their interests are not joined,

if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so." [53] Furthermore, even though

individuals A and B have their own beliefs, interests, and ways of functioning, they are still

joined together through their identification, becoming substantially unified, or consubstantial.

Identification aims to create a sense of belonging and connection between individuals and other

individuals or groups by emphasizing their shared characteristics, beliefs, and experiences. Thus,

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[52]Mooney, *Rhetoric Religious "Cults,"* 129-154.
[53]Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 20.

if a religious group aims for an individual to identify themselves with the group, they are likely to use rhetorical strategies to persuade that individual to believe that, while that individual may not necessarily agree with a certain motive or belief of the group, the group shares their beliefs, ideals, needs, and desires. While "two persons may be identified in terms of some principle they share in common, an 'identification' that does not deny their distinctness."[54] The Twelve Tribes, while trying to establish consubstantiality with its potential recruits, does not just attempt to align an individual's beliefs with their own by emphasizing their shared beliefs, but also suggests that abandoning one's distinctness and individual identity is a positive and enlightening move in an individual's life.

While any recruitment-focused artifact must establish consubstantiality with its reader, the Twelve Tribes does so with the transition from "I" language to "we" language. In each of these narratives, the speaker, usually unidentified, begins their narrative with a discussion of their past shortcomings. Over the course of their metanoic narrative, the substitutive moment is described as the moment that the individual decides to abandon their individuality in favor of the unidimensional group identity. These substitutive moments are also movements from the gendered "I" to the united and un-gendered "we." Thus, the individual agency of the speaker is removed in favor of the consubstantial group identity.

Testimony and Metanoia

The testimonies to be discussed in this paper can be considered narratives of spiritual metanoia. Metanoia, or a personal change as a result of a change in one's thinking or worldview, is narrativized by religious converts in a way that attempts to convey the personal changes they experienced as a result of their life-changing affective religious or spiritual experience. While

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[54]Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 21.

metanoia does not necessarily evidence a religious conversion, it always "depends on a substitutive moment," which, in the case of a religious testimony, normally relies on a narrative pattern in which "the convert, recognizing the sinful nature of his life, rejects his old ways and takes on a new life in Christ, marked by regret, penance, and worship."[55] Furthermore, while non-religious rhetorical narratives of metanoia reject a specific wrong idea that was formally held by the speaker in a way that allows them to be fully rid of their past beliefs (the logocentric substitutive moment), spiritual metanoia "maintains the substitutive movement of rhetorical metanoia, but instead of replacing speech with speech (logos) it substitutes the old sinful being with a new personal identity."[56] While one can denounce a past wrong by just admitting the changes to their lifestyle with speech, narratives of Christian spiritual metanoia illustrate the complete change in identity that must take place on a non-discursive level. While repentance for past "sins" does not happen dialogically, there must be a discursive element to the narrative of a spiritual metanoia that does. Thus, we are presented with the written conversion narratives of the group members to be discussed in my case studies, which describe the affective substitutive moment, a moment that has no discursive weight, in a way that only describes the emotional weight of an internal experience. As rhetorical theorist Adam Ellwanger asserts in *Metanoia: Rhetoric, Authenticity, and the Transformation of the Self*, "Because conversion is only signified externally in the form of speech, gestures, writing, or some other communicative practice, the internal phenomena of transformation is unimportant: people are who they say they are."[57] In all of the narratives discussed below, the metanoic experience is discussed to inspire potential recruits to join the group. While it is clear that spiritual metanoic narratives are not singular to

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[55]Ellwanger, *Metanoia*, 5.
[56]Ellwanger, *Metanoia,* 39.

[57]Ellwanger, *Metanoia,* 43.

high-demand or cultic groups, the narratives contained in the following case studies are, while maintaining the conventions of the spiritual metanoic narrative, not placing as much importance on the connection with God as they are connection with the group itself. Thus, while narratives of spiritual metanoia are the through-line of these case studies, there is additional and equal attention paid to the metanoic narrative of the new identity given to the subject as a result of their group involvement.

Section 2: Case Studies

A 2021 blog post from the group's website titled "I Was A Loner" includes a photo of the article's author; she is pictured smiling in front of a pastoral backdrop, wearing a high-necked denim and cotton layered dress:

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This outfit is part of the rhetorically constructed expectations of gender enactment within the confines of "modest" womanhood– an article from the group's website titled "Modesty: Is It All But Lost?" details the expectations of women's modesty in the group.[59] It begins:

> Modesty is a word not commonly used these days. Most people hardly know what
> the word actually means, and for many it brings to mind images of over-dressed women

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[58]Twelve Tribes, "Ishah," 2021, https://www.twelvetribes.org/article/i-was-loner.

[59]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty: Is It All but Lost?" Twelvetribes.org, 2021, https://twelvetribes.org/article/modesty.

of the 1800's or some such thing. But modesty is actually a very wonderful thing, much

deeper than the clothes you wear, which are only the outward expression of it. Modesty is

a matter of the heart. The word modesty literally means to have a proper estimation of

one's own self. This means to not think too highly or too lowly of yourself, but to really

have peace in knowing who you are. This is why modesty is all but lost in society today,

because people are very confused about who they are, especially women. (Twelve Tribes)

This doctrine of modesty is a prime example of how, even on the Twelve Tribes' public-facing

promotional website, they are clear in the expectations that they have of women's gender

enactments. Modesty is clearly not a novel concept when it comes to religious tradition, but the

specificity about modesty being a way for women to become less "confused" about their

personal identities elucidates the particular rhetorical strategies used to control gendered

self-expression; women in the group are expected to surrender control over their individual

gender performances. Women in the Twelve Tribes, as well as other patriarchal religious

organizations, are expected to perform gender in a less expressive and individualistic way than

their male counterparts. While the group's appeals to consubstantiality also rely on the men's

abilities to conform to group expectations, women are expected, in the group's own words, to "to

save her affections for her husband, and to willingly give herself to him and submit to him."[60] As

Simone de Beauvoir asserted in *The Second Sex*, "When a sex or a class is condemned to

immanence, it is necessary to offer it in the mirage of some form of transcendence."[61] Thus, as an

answer to the Frequently Asked Question on their website of "Are men and women equal in the

Twelve Tribes," they state that they are "Equal, yes. Identical, no," and that God has designated

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[60]Twelve Tribes, *Modesty*.

[61]Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949; repr., Vintage Classics, 1972), 632.

for them separate purposes.[62] By asserting both that women are equal to men and that women must be submissive to men, the group can establish, based on their own and traditional biblical doctrines, that because of men's proximity to God, being submissive to one's husband is synonymous with one's submission to God himself. If a group member believes the group's teachings asserting that "God created woman to be a friend and a helper for man," her subjugated status in the group can be connected with her sense of salvation.[63]

"I Was A Loner"

Gender Performance Pre-Metanoic Turn

This blog post, titled "I Was A Loner," identifies how the idea of women's supposed confusion about their own positions in society is illustrated in these conversion narratives, and how the careful rhetorical moves that these narratives make further establish how involving oneself with the group can simply and effectively "explain" a woman's purpose to her. Because the principal goal of these narratives is recruiting potential members, the gestures made to gender expression are more subtle than those in articles like "Modesty: Is It All But Lost." Though that article, too, is intent on arguing why women's subjugated status is beneficial, it does so through explicit and biblically-backed logical appeals. However, the rhetorical strategies used in these conversion narratives are less concentrated on the benefits of biblical or even group beliefs of womanhood but rather emphasize how women are uniquely suited to join this particular group. However, it is important that the group's promotional materials not explicitly contradict themselves, so the idea of confusion of the true "purpose" of women plays an integral role in

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[62]Twelve Tribes, "Frequently-Asked Questions," Twelvetribes.org, March 19, 2021, https://twelvetribes.org/whoweare/faq.

[63]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."

proving why the group is uniquely fit to clarify the potential recruit's purpose both as a woman and as an individual.

The article begins:

I was a loner. And a cynic. I pored over philosophy books on Friday nights with a box of wine. The little time I did spend with other people ended in debates over the state of humanity, which I believed was doomed. I went to class. I wrote my papers. I passed by on the conveyor belt largely unnoticed. I listened to music, blasting, in my apartment in the slums of Worcester, Massachusetts. I would go hiking and camping whenever my meager funds allowed me. I prided myself in being a headstrong woman, rejecting all the societal norms that tried to confine me (Twelve Tribes).

This foundation for the spiritually metanoic narrative is important to note; the author details her academic pursuits in a negative light, using words like "loner", "cynic" and "doomed."[64] By placing this initial negative association with philosophical questioning under a photo of the author smiling, bare-faced, and in modest, puritanical dress, the pastoral values of the group are set in opposition to critical questioning of one's own purpose and environment. Furthermore, ending this paragraph with a past-tense self-report of rejecting societal expectations of womanhood not only suggests that the group does share these ideals but also that being a "headstrong woman" is inherently antithetical to the group's mission and purpose. While this narrative is told from the perspective of an individual group member, the deprecation of her former values is directly aligned with those of the group. In "Modesty: Is It All But Lost," the issue of "headstrong" womanhood is also directly addressed: "They want careers, or money, or whatever they think will give them identity and fulfillment. But a woman who has modesty

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[64]Twelve Tribes, "Loner."

knows who she is."[65] The condemnation of a woman's search for individual identity is essential

in limiting any individual woman in the group's enactment of her gender, and thus limiting any

individual woman in the group's performance of her identity. By limiting the way that women in

the group are permitted to perform their gender, the group is thus limiting women's identities, as

identity is inherently tied with how gender is performed and how that performance is

interpreted.[66] Because the author's identity, at least as far as a potential recruit would be able to

interpret it, is expressed through her self-report of "misguided" attempts to reach

self-sustainability and rejection of societal gender norms, the author's identity is thus also tied to

the acceptance and participation in binary expectations of gender enactment.

One unique aspect of this metanoic narrative is the author's integration of notable

quotations from literary figures such as Dostoyevsky, Atwood, and Kierkegaard. Especially set

in opposition to the repudiation of philosophical questions foundational to the testimony's thesis,

the inclusion of titles like *The Handmaid's Tale*, which depicts a "dystopian society in which

women's lives are governed by reproduction and gender roles are enacted strictly and imposed

forcefully," is an unpredictable choice.[67] This choice can be viewed as a legitimate illustration of

the author's understanding and application of the knowledge gleaned from the texts that she

referenced, but her participation in and enactment of the patriarchal and clearly coded gender

expectations throughout the rest of this piece contradicts that interpretation. Rather, by invoking

these major contributions to the literary canon to support her argument that the Twelve Tribes

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[65]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."

[66]See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22.

[67]Aisha Matthews, "Gender, Ontology, and the Power of the Patriarchy: A Postmodern Feminist Analysis of Octavia Butler's Wild Seed and Margaret Atwood's the Handmaid's Tale," *Women's Studies* 47, no. 6 (August 2018): 637–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1492403.

granted her freedom from the drudgery of the higher educational system, she is able to both

appeal to and denounce women pursuing higher education. Appealing to this audience is

important, as the Twelve Tribes has a notable presence on college campuses, with Yellow Deli

locations on or near college campuses in Chattanooga and Pulaski, Tennessee, Boulder,

Colorado, and Ithaca, New York, just to name a few.[68] It is also crucial to clarify that each of

these authors and works is referenced before the metanoic turn, thus also equating the

interpretation of and fascination for non-religious texts to a foolish, pre-saved identity. If the

author intended to incorporate these texts to inform the metanoic movement or to support her

argument that joining the group realized her potential and purpose, she would have to

purposefully include and defend the use of these quotations both before and after her substitutive

metanoic moment. While she does not explicitly state that these texts contributed to her path of

self-destruction, she does pair the quotations with pejorative phrasing like being "neck deep" in

drudgery and growing "more and more dissatisfied, unfulfilled, and empty."[69] By suggesting that

engaging in productive and thought-provoking literary study in combination with the greater

group belief that a proper and modest woman "doesn't need to try to become 'greater' than she

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[68]Twelve Tribes, "Where in the World Can You Find a Yellow Deli?" Yellowdeli.com, 2023, https://www.yellowdeli.com/locations; Here, you will find a list of all Yellow Deli locations. Because the Yellow Deli is an integral part of the Tribes' proselytizing, their proximity to college campuses allows them to establish credibility with students, as the Delis are normally open 24 hours a day, 5 days a week, and serve cheap and flavorful foods. Furthermore, a key component in maintaining successful religious influence, especially without the presence of a charismatic figure, is recruiting and maintaining membership. By targeting younger recruits, especially those who may be dissatisfied with the environment or demands of higher learning institutions, the group is able to instill its values in more impressionable and more valuable (in terms of labor, mental elasticity, fertility, etc) potential members.

[69]Twelve Tribes, "Loner."

was created to be,"[70] the author is able to firmly assert and defend the correlation between improper performances of gender expectations and institutions of higher education.

Metanoic Turn and Consubstantiality

The substitutive moment, or the metanoic turn, occurs after a description of the author's search for purpose whilst "convinc[ing] myself that I was fulfilled by my books, music, knowledge, drugs, and cynicism."[71] The concepts of knowledge and fulfillment are put in opposition to one another throughout the pre-metanoic section, hinting at a metanoic turn that advocates for the rejection of knowledge. Since the spiritual metanoic narrative "substitutes the old sinful being with a new personal identity," the movement from knowledge-seeking to the new personal consubstantial identity is where the real rhetorical weight lies.[72] For her to successfully argue the importance of her new personal identity, she must also reject the sinful being described in the pre-metanoic section. The substitutive moment in this narrative occurs when the author states:

> Just before going under, I met a group of people whose lives surpassed all of my highest hopes of peace, love, and unity. They lived together, worked together, and shared all things in common. There was no pretense among them. For the first time I saw the true extent of my fallen condition, compared to the limitless love and selflessness I had finally found in them. I never wanted to leave, and they welcomed me with open arms and eyes filled with love. I am now a part of them. (Twelve Tribes)

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[70]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."

[71]Twelve Tribes, "Loner."

[72]Ellwanger, *Metanoia*, 39.

While this shift still precedes the movement from the "I" narrative to the "we" narrative, it establishes the consubstantial identity between the author and the group. By underscoring that the group "shared all things in common," personal agency, especially when it comes to material means of self and gender expression, is already implied to lack the same importance as group expression. Furthermore, I assert that the comparison of the "fallen" individual self with the "love" of the group is a blatant renunciation of individual critical thought, thus limiting the expectations of dissent in favor of a shared and unified group thought. The author is not just identified with the group because of shared motives, but blatantly describes sharing substance with the group; "I am now a part of them."[73] This phrasing suggests a total compromise of personal agency and identity, and therefore a total compromise of any authority that may be granted to women outside of the group. Moreover, the movement from "I" to "we" is also a gendered movement, or, a moment of degendering. Because the narrative begins with a clearly gendered "I," it can be inferred from the cues that suggest improper gender enactment that the group, because it offers an alternative to her former unfulfillment, will also offer an alternative to her previous method of enacting or rejecting gender expectations.

When the shift from "I" to "we" begins, there are no descriptions of gender or even gendered terminology when referring to the group's purpose, but rather the unidimensional substitution of a unified "we." While the "I" pronoun is still peppered throughout the post-substitutive moment narrative, it is always supported by a "we" or an "our"; "I have joined the ranks of those who have decided to no longer allow evil to triumph over their souls. Through our lives, our God is restoring the streets for all to dwell."[74] Thus, the consubstantial identity both removes the gender and the agency from the individual author.

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[73]Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 20.

[74]Twelve Tribes, "Loner."

This pattern is repeated, though from a different perspective, in the following case study. While this narrative focuses on a college-aged recruit, the following narrative focuses on a high-school-aged runaway. Hence, there are two distinct audiences for these pieces, both operating on the ideals of proper and improper enactments of gender expectations. While the content of both narratives is different, the core structure and patterns are the same. Therefore, I will use this second analysis merely to inform the arguments I have proposed here.

"Lost and Found"

The article titled "Lost and Found," like "I Was A Loner," was published on the group's website in 2021. Also like "I Was A Loner," this article is accompanied by a photograph of the author, who identifies herself in the body of the text as "Megan (Talmida):"[75] She is depicted wearing a high-necked white top, no makeup, and a low ponytail in front of a forested backdrop:

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[75]Greater Miami Jewish Federation, "Common Hebrew Words and Phrases" (Greater Miami Jewish Federation, 2023), https://jewishmiami.org/about/departments/missions/common_hebrew_words_and_phrases/#:~:text=Student%20(male%2Ffemale),Talmid%2FTalmida. This group, like many cults, renames its members upon initiation. This renaming is also an attempt to sever the individual from their former identity. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to dissect the naming practices of the Twelve Tribes, I will note here that their group-given names are Hebrew. Talmida, group-given name of the author, means "student."

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Within the first few sentences of the testimony, the author asserts that "A roller coaster is a good analogy of being a teenager, because there are many ups and downs," thus establishing that the narrative is to describe the "fallen" individual's fault of succumbing to the tumult and insecurity of teenhood.[77] While this narrative does not pay the same attention to vilifying the pursuit of non-Biblical knowledge, it instead vilifies the author's prior outlook on romantic relationships and societal pressures.

Gender Performance Pre-Metanoic Turn

The narrative, which first gains its footing and begins to tell a cogent story when the author describes reaching middle school, is centered around the rejection and insecurity of peer and societal pressures. While describing "Trying to fit in and 'be cool'," the author states that "I didn't know how to relate to other girls. Being with the boys was so much easier."[78] This assertion comes after suggesting that she couldn't relate to other girls because she "didn't know how to have 'come-backs' or be mean to people,"[79] further cementing the division between the

[76]Twelve Tribes, "Tamida," 2021, https://twelvetribes.org/article/lost-and-found

[77]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found," Twelvetribes.org, February 21, 2021, https://twelvetribes.org/article/lost-and-found.

[78]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

[79]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

author and her environmental expectations of gender enactment. Because this division is presented so early in the greater narrative, it is important to recognize not only the divide that is cemented between the author and her environment as well as the author and other women, but also the rhetorical strategies employed to imply expectations of gender performance concerning men. It is clear that the author views her performance of feminine gender expectations as a way to avoid the scrutiny of other women, instead finding safety in the company of men. By including this suggestion about men's unique ability to provide solace from the competition between girls her age, the author both places men on a pedestal and disconnects herself from the girls who, inevitably being subjected to the same patriarchal expectations of feminine gender performance, likely also compared themselves to her.

This deprecation of gender performances codified as being feminine, i.e. relying on feminine guidance rather than male comfort, holds the pre-metanoic section of the narrative together. When the author moves from middle school to high school, she does so describing how she "had to have the name-brand clothing you can hardly afford. And, of course, I had to wear make-up or else I'm not pretty."[80] In this description of her past, the author portrays her pre-metanoic self as inherently foolish for attempting to fit within a gendered system. Instead of rejecting the patriarchal systems that put women in competition with one another, she frames herself as being foolish for not knowing how to combat them. This is an interesting choice in contrast to the pre-metanoic section of "I Was A Loner," wherein the author paints herself as foolish for being "a headstrong woman, rejecting all the societal norms that tried to confine

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[80]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

me."[81] Yet, both of these choices situate the performance of "immodest" womanhood as being responsible for one's personal downfall.

The group's doctrine of women's modesty mirrors the exact social conditions of her described high school experience: while the rules about gender performance are explicitly stated rather than implicitly understood, the group's expectations of gender performance place on members the same pressure to achieve perfect womanhood. While high school, according to the author, was attached to having to change one's sense of natural style or comfort "or else I'm not pretty,"[82] the Twelve Tribes expects a total rejection of individual performances of gender, instead insisting that "if a woman truly has an inner peace with who she is, then the outward sign will be the discreet way she dresses and her submissive, gentle behavior."[83] Because the group functions under the pretense that they alone have the capability to tell right from wrong, their expectations of gender performance are uniquely dangerous; while a woman who rejects the expectations of feminine gender performance might face social hardships in a high school environment, a woman who rejects the expectations of feminine gender performance in a religious environment risks being seen not only as a social outcast but as spiritually corrupt. Thus, by including the gender expectations she was formerly expected to perform, the author's lack of personal agency over her gender performance within the group is obscured.

Metanoic Turn and Consubstantiality

In this account, the substitutive metanoic moment occurs when the author describes feeling a lack of purpose. Because she was unable to find a sense of personal purpose through

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[81]Twelve Tribes,"Loner."

[82]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found.

[83]Twelve Tribes,"Modesty."

conspiracy theories[84] or drug use, she found it hiking. The author describes hiking as

"uncomfortable, tiring, smelly, dirty, beautiful, peaceful, exhilarating, breathtaking,"[85] and asserts

that she found the Twelve Tribes through a hostel for hikers in Rutland, Vermont.[86] After being

introduced to the hostel by her friend who "said that really nice people ran it, but they were kind

of a cult, but a nice cult,"[87] she resorted to staying there anyway. When she did, she described her

substitutive moment as taking place when she found one of the Twelve Tribes' theology-focused

recruitment materials:

> In the next shelter, we found a paper that had a story of a man who wondered what his
>
> purpose was and why we exist. NO WAY! I couldn't believe what I was reading! Could
>
> this be it? I read about this man named Yahshua, which means "Mighty and Powerful to
>
> Save." Ohh…This is Jesus' real birth name. Wow! I did not know that before! (I didn't
>
> know anything about "Jesus" really – Christianity had seemed weird and religious to me.)

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[84]Céline Schöpfer et al., "'Where There Are Villains, There Will Be Heroes': Belief in Conspiracy Theories as an Existential Tool to Fulfill Need for Meaning," *Personality and Individual Differences* 200 (January 2023): 111900, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111900. Research suggests a psychological correlation between people who believe in conspiracy theories and a sense of purpose fulfillment. By including this fact in her testimony, the author conveys a deep need for an explanation of her purpose, which then becomes fulfilled by the group. Additionally, because the author expresses anxiety about the apocalypse, the Twelve Tribes' doomsday beliefs address her fundamental concern of unreedeeming death. Between her search for purpose and her fear of the apocalypse, her readiness to sacrifice personal agency is made more understandable.

[85]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

[86]Hiker's Hostel, "Testimonials," Hikershostel.org, 2023, https://hikershostel.org/about-us/testimonials; This hostel has its own website with its own section of testimonials; interestingly, though one testimonial acknowledges the group's daily "celebration service with testimonies, music and dancing," they are seemingly selected from non-group members. Because this case study acknowledges that the hostel's reputation was that they were run by a cult, the outsider testimonies legitimize the group's *ethos* and normalize its behaviors.
[87]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

So my heart was pounding as I hiked up the hill and we hitchhiked into Rutland to the

Yellow Deli. (Twelve Tribes)

While there are obvious details about her choice to commit her life to the group omitted, she

emphasizes how the Twelve Tribes recruitment materials helped her recognize the errors of her

past. This choice suggests that the group's recruitment materials are uniquely persuasive,

particularly to those who are struggling to find a sense of purpose, and that when she compared

the sense of purpose of Yashua and the actions of the group, "I saw His people, I saw love, I saw

families and happy children. I saw purpose," in her words.[88] This narrative, even more than the

previous one, places enormous confidence in the group's ability to answer a potential member's

questions about their purpose.

Furthermore, the author states that by joining the group, she became "No longer lost and

confused – but I am part of a people, and a new culture where all things are being restored and

the purpose for our lives is being revealed." [89] By expressly consubstantiating with the group by

asserting that she is "part of a people," the sacrifice of her personal identity is also tied with her

innate sense of purpose. In consubstantiating with the group, she loses her need to perform in a

way that adheres to implicit standards of behavior and instead allows the group, or the "people"

of whom she is a part, to dictate the meaning and expectations of her performance of identity.

Judith Butler asserts that "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to

proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only

become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of

gender intelligibility."[90] In the case of the Twelve Tribes, finding purpose, and thus identifying

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[88]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

[89]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."
[90]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22.

fully with the group, is tied with an elaborate standard of gender performance. Without

performing gender within the very strict boundaries of "modesty," your womanhood, and thus

your purpose, your purpose, and thus your identity, is considered inherently wrong. While this

narrative advertises a renewed sense of purpose, it also describes giving up personal expression

in favor of "liv[ing] for others." [91] The group's description of a woman's purpose, in "God's

proper order," is "to be a friend and a helper for man…to be a wife and a mother, to raise

children who would in turn know who they were created to be."[92] Thus, consubstantiating with

the group and living for others as a woman means also performing within extraordinarily narrow

and restrictive expectations of gender enactment.

"Redeemer"

To truly understand how different the expectations of gender performance are for the

group's men, it is essential to contrast how gender is performed in texts with similar aims to the

two previous case studies. In the two following case studies, the focus of the narratives is not on

the author's foolishness but is rather on the already realized needs that the group fulfills. In both

"I Was A Loner" and "Lost and Found," the authors describe their pasts as though they were

foolishly misguided in every area of their lives. They both express a propensity to rebellion or

headstrongness and, because these descriptions of the authors' previous gender enactments are

included in the pre-metanoic section of the narratives, illustrate that the group was able to protect

them from being "lost at sea, hanging on to a broken piece of driftwood for dear life"[93] or

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[91]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

[92]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."
[93]Twelve Tribes,"Loner."

"longing to fulfill what they were created for – to live for others and the one who made us."[94]

Religious theology is only briefly mentioned in "Lost and Found" when the author identifies

with the group because their literature describes Yeshua as "a man who wondered what his

purpose was and why we exist" rather than an ultimate authority whose sacred texts the author

must be so committed to that they are willing to "g[i]ve him my life."[95] Similarly, in "I Was A

Loner," the use of quotations is strictly limited to the pre-metanoic section, whereas the

post-metanoic section's only reference to theology or reason for joining the group is vague and

focuses primarily on abstract figures of "God," or "Yashua," and "Satan," accompanied by their

abstract signifiers of "good" and "evil." Because the pursuit of knowledge is described as

bearing some responsibility in the author's potential of "going under," and because her beliefs,

which she supported with literary references before the metanoic substitutive moment, moved

from definitive and defensible to abstract and focused on how "anything short of laying down

our lives daily for our savior Yahshua just continues to build Satan's kingdom," the author's

ability to perform feminine gender enactments while also pursuing, acquiring, and utilizing

knowledge is thus revoked.[96]

This revocation of women's right to intellectual questioning seems to be directly

correlated with women's inherent "confusion" about their abilities and purpose: "[Woman] was

created to be a wife and a mother, to raise children who would in turn know who they were

created to be. In this she would find peace and rest. Sadly enough, today though, many women

strive to be something 'better.'"[97] By implying that a woman is unjustified in her pursuit of

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[94]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

[95]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."
[96]Twelve Tribes,"Loner."

[97]Twelve Tribes,"Modesty."

knowledge, and that by pursuing independent knowledge she is rebelling against the very

purpose of her existence, any sense of agency is therefore removed about a woman's ability to

enact gender in a way that differs from the strict guidelines that the group has explicitly laid out.

As Judith Butler famously explains, "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other

gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary

pair."[98] Womanhood, or enactments of femininity in the Twelve Tribes must be achieved by not

only serving and displaying "submissive, gentle behavior"[99] to the hegemonic class of male

members, but also by not being men and ultimately being unable to safely emulate any

enactments of masculinity. While there is, and likely always will be, a level of expectation of

binary gender enactment outside of the cult, the group's closed status and rhetorically

constructed consubstantial identity serve as echo chambers for restrictive gender performance.

They have, as is evidenced both by the narratives themselves and by the aforementioned

literature concerning modesty, successfully tethered the removal of women's personal agency in

selecting which expectations of gender they enact and their inherent sense of purpose and reason

for creation, ultimately dangerously conflating the purpose of woman to the service of and

submission to their male counterparts.

Gender Performance Pre-Metanoic Turn

The group's expectations of women's submission to and service of men, understood

through the differing language used to describe men's and women's perceptions of purpose,

allows for a deeper understanding of how gender expectations affect the group's men and women

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[98]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.

[99]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."

differently. In particular, intellectual questioning and searching, with critical questions, for a

spiritual purpose are present in both of these masculinely gendered narratives. In "Redeemer," an

article also published on the group's website in 2021, an unidentified author describes crying out

for God to help him learn from his experience of romantic rejection: "I was hopelessly thinking

in circles, too. Over and over I reconsidered what I had said; what she had said. What I did; what

she did. What I would do next... or not."[100] One important distinction in this section is that the

author does not portray his romantic engagement or failed marriage in detail regarding the

significant other, but rather focuses on how it emotionally affected him. In "Lost and Found," the

author describes being negatively influenced by her first boyfriend, who, "Totally blinded

because I 'loved' him,"[101] became involved in an alternative culture. She connects the story to

another boyfriend who, though he is not significant to the story's development, there is special

attention given to addressing his role in leading her toward the metanoic substitutive moment.

While the author of "Lost and Found" does not name the boyfriends, they are given significant

dedications in a relatively short text; the only mentions of his romantic relationship in the

entirety of "Redeemer" are confined to a depersonalized "she" and an abstract assertion that "my

marriage had failed."[102] These examples are both direct results of the group's strict binary

expectations of gender enactment. The woman's testimony connects her, through several phases

of life, to men who play insignificant roles in her eventual involvement in the group. Conversely,

the role of the wife, who, as his narrative explicitly indicates, was responsible for his desperate

pleas for God's guidance which made him uniquely vulnerable to the group's display of

kindness, is essentially completely unaddressed.

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[100]Twelve Tribes,"Redeemer."

[101]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."
[102]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

Despite the failure of his marriage, along with the estrangement of his son and the feeling

that "I had done everything right, according to the world, but still I failed,"[103] the author

dedicates more time to listing his achievements and credentials than he does to the discussion of

what led him to the substitutive metanoic moment. While the wife is indirectly addressed

throughout the narrative, he dedicates several sentences to reiterating his prior accomplishments;

"With a lifetime of academic and spiritual study behind me, and a successful business of my

own, it seemed as if I should have had everything I needed to succeed"; "I read book after book,

after book, after book[…]But nothing I ever learned from the dozens of books I had studied

could help me in my time of greatest need."[104]While the author of "I Was a Loner" also draws

attention to the fact that she "pored over philosophy books" and "wrote my papers,"[105] they are

framed as contributing to her downfall instead of leading her towards "receiving the education of

what it means to be a 'Son of the living God.'"[106]

Though the author of "Redeemer" does note that his prior search for knowledge was "the

education of a fool who could learn and learn and never understand," the author, even while

emphasizing the failures of his prior education, places importance on receiving the "Worth While

Education" of the Twelve Tribes.[107] He describes the education of the group with both explicit

biblical references ("like the Biblical patriarch did with his beloved son Isaac"[108]) and

group-specific theological details. While both "I Was a Loner" and "Lost and Found" describe

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[103]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

[104]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

[105]Twelve Tribes, "Loner."
[106]Twelve Tribes,"Redeemer."

[107]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

[108]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

certain tenants of the group's core theology, they do so abstractly with the focus of these

invocations being that"The truth is love, and love repeats itself over and over again, for eternity

— no one is ever left behind."[109] "Redeemer" essentially captures the same tenants, yet the

language used represents a sense of total authority over the truth and presents the immediate call

to action that "We speak on His behalf, and we call you to leave this world behind."[110]

Metanoic Turn and Consubstantiality

The substitutive moment in "Redeemer" takes place when the author finds an answer of

how he might make meaning of his unfortunate circumstances, and, after crying out that "I need

to LEARN from this,"[111] sees the men from the group as providing him with the answers to his

intellectual and spiritual questions of created purpose. We do not see theology feature so

prominently in the women's metanoia, just as we do not see the emphasis on confusion present in

those narratives in "Redeemer."

The tone of the pre-substitutive moment and post-substitutive moment are also very

similar in "Redeemer." Because the education that the author received is not inherently

connected to his sense of confusion and downfall like in "I Was A Loner," he is thereby

permitted to leverage his education and more academic tone to appeal to readers who lacked

faith in the group's established ethos. Legitimacy and authority are granted to him within the

group solely based on and tethered to his performance of gender; women are instructed and

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[109]Twelve Tribes,"Loner."

[110]Twelve Tribes,"Redeemer."

[111]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

expected not to "rule over man, however this is hard for many of today's women to accept,"[112] yet men are expected to act as the woman's ultimate authority, deciding what is right and wrong independent of their input. Because a woman must not appear as authoritative over another man and must "willingly give herself to him and submit to him,"[113] men are awarded any agency that one is capable of having while also being subjected to the inherently oppressive standards of the cult.

"Why Wander"

Gender Performance Pre-Metanoic Turn

In another man's testimony titled "Why Wander," the unnamed author describes being "alone and estranged," searching for a life that would show him his purpose.[114] While this tone of confusion is similar to the women's narratives, the pre-metanoic section functions much differently. The author alternates between the objective experience of "so many people," and subjective experiences of "I," "me," and "you," finally moving to "we" after the metanoic turn.[115] By using both his own experience and the experience of "some people," he is not just shaming himself but is also identifying himself with the reader. He uses "you" in reference to an abstract

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[112]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."

[113]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."
[114]Twelve Tribes, "Why Wander? ," Twelvetribes.org, 2021, https://twelvetribes.org/article/why-wander.

[115]Twelve Tribes, "Why Wander."

addressee, but does so also to imply the reader's struggle to find purpose. While some of the other narratives do include "you," they do so as an invocation of the reader in the post-metanoic section. Instead, the author of "Why Wander" establishes consubstantiality with the individual reader before describing his own substitutive moment, implying a sense of authority even when discussing his past.

While describing his past, however, he does so with the same depersonalized abstraction used in "Redeemer";

> I would drift from town to town, hoping each town would be different. I hoped it would be a new start. But I found over and over that every place left me the same – alone – just me, myself, and I. I felt alone and estranged. I could not seem to fit into any kind of scene. People would walk by with their fancy laptops and not even say hi. I may not have a college degree, but I can at least be kind and say, "Hello." When I was alone, all the guilt came upon me. It came back to haunt me. So I wandered some more. I could run, but I couldn't ever hide from my past. The guilt would follow me.[116]

This excerpt is the only description of the author's past that does not come through a condemnation of an amorphous other. Even here, he condemns someone with a "fancy laptop" who did not say hello to him, taking up a significant portion of the section in the narrative dedicated to self-disclosure. While he does not dedicate the same time to his achievements as the author of "Redeemer," he also never describes in any detail the facets of his past failures, which takes up the bulk of both "I Was A Loner" and "Lost and Found." Thus, the authority is still ultimately in the hands of the narrative's man, as the responsibility he is expected to take for his past is offset by the responsibility he is expected to take for censuring and expecting things from

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[116]Twelve Tribes,"Redeemer."

others. However, the bulk of the gestures that the author makes to elucidate the group's expectations of gender enactment occur in the post-metanoic section.

Metanoic Turn and Consubstantiality

The substitutive moment in this piece, like its pre-metanoia, is abstract and impersonal. He states that "I prayed and I found a place where I am learning to love;" this is the only instance of the author describing his journey to finding and accepting the doctrine of the Twelve Tribes. The bulk of the rhetorical work that this narrative aims to do exists only in the post-metanoia, where he lays out a direct call to action for men to participate in a movement where men can "fight together for the same cause - for the sake of love."[117] This move establishes both the piece's intended audience (men) and utilizes powerfully militant language ("fight"; "overcome the evil one"[118]) to establish a sense of credibility within that audience. He goes on to assert that "The desire of every man's heart is to be dependable, but you can never be dependable if you continue to flee."[119] By describing what every man is expected to want or be capable of (dependability), the group codifies the value of dependability as masculine. Similarly, in the group's modesty literature, they state that "Deep down inside, every mother wants to be able to pass on to her daughter the vision to keep herself pure,"[120] therefore codifying purity as a feminine value. Consubstantiality, then, means something entirely different between the binary expectations and rhetorical constructions of gender performance. While a man may identify with the group and be encouraged to find purpose in dependability thus imbuing masculinity with a

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[117]Twelve Tribes,"Why Wander."
[118]Twelve Tribes, "Why Wander."

[119]Twelve Tribes, "Why Wander."

[120]Twelve Tribes, "Modesty."

certain level of agency, women are encouraged to find purpose in submission and purity thus

removing their agency completely. Ultimately, this is the central rhetorical aim of this particular

narrative; while the author does also suggest that "You can exchange your old life for His new

one of caring for others,"[121] he maintains an authoritative tone singular to these masculinely

coded narratives.

Conclusion

While the women's narratives describe consubstantiating with the group after "The love

and care I received,"[122] and seeing "the true extent of my fallen condition, compared to the

limitless love and selflessness I had finally found in them,"[123] the men's narratives focus on a

more expansive mission of realizing "the purpose of man, to rule over all fallen spirits and then

nurture creation through the universe, causing all things to bear only good fruit."[124] To fit within

the confines that the group details upon recruitment (of giving up one's life and independent

purpose for the good of the group and personal salvation), one must be given a tangible reason to

abandon the comfort of the material world beyond the cult. The reasons that the group gives, as

evidenced by the different rhetorically coded expectations of gender enactments in these

metanoic narratives, are intrinsically gendered. They *must* be gendered, as there are explicit

gender enactments condemned by the narratives and confirmed to be considered antithetical to

one's created purpose by these narratives and by the group's modesty literature. The men's

narratives describe theological reasons for joining as the foundation with human connection as

[121]Twelve Tribes, "Why Wander?"

[122]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."
[123]Twelve Tribes, "Loner."

[124]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

secondary because men are expected to be the authority figures with permission to express and indulge wisdom.[125] The women's narratives describe human connections as the foundation for their conversion with theology as secondary, because too confidently making assertions about the group's theology without also submitting to one's husband and maintaining purity would be considered improper, and thus ungodly, gender performance. More specifically, it would be considered a symptom of refusing to adopt the fundamental tenet of the group's gender ideology: "God created woman to be a friend and a helper for man."[126] Thus the group's attempts at establishing consubstantiality between the differently gendered conversion narratives are representative of the group's clear and divisive gender ideology. While these narratives are all aimed at recruiting new members, using rhetoric as a persuasive force, they are better equipped to illuminate how deeply oppressive the gender ideology of a patriarchal and aberrant religious movement like the Twelve Tribes can be for members who are already inside.

Authority, especially as it relates to theological and educational agency, plays a central role in these narratives. By confining any elaborate discussion of the group's theology to the men's narratives, women are thereby restricted in how they can acquire and disseminate knowledge. By restricting learning, even within the confines of what the group considers to be a "Worth While Education,"[127] to the group's men, women are thereby discouraged from gaining

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[125]Twelve Tribes, "Restoration;" This article, which is essentially an "About Us" page on the website, describes the 1990s as being the period that the purpose of the Twelve Tribes was realized: "They gained more understanding about the ways in which society was violating "natural law" — to the point of calling evil good and good evil. It was becoming obvious that the time-honored ideals of the hard-working man, the submissive wife, and respectful children were under attack." Again, women are defined by their relationships to "hard-working" men and their agency is further limited.

[126]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

[127]Twelve Tribes, "Redeemer."

information that could potentially lead to thorough questioning of their subordinate status, thus

strictly confining agency to those who maintain all leadership positions within the group: men.

In the same way that there can not be an assumption of a universal patriarchy, there also

cannot be an assumption of a universal cult dynamic. While not every cult functions like the

Twelve Tribes, and not every cult uses gender to limit agency of group members, I argue that the

term "cult" can still apply to groups if they maintain, both through strategic rhetorical control of

individual expression and continually reinforced group identity, a sense of control over members.

Instead of spending time addressing why "cult" is or is not the proper term to address particular

groups, it is important to focus on why this term might be used to describe some groups and not

others. Words matter. Attempting to refute that would be to reject the study of rhetoric altogether.

However, it is essential to note why, if a word is imbued with an inherently negative connotation,

it maintains cultural and scholarly relevance in any capacity. In the case of the Twelve Tribes, it

is evident that agency–particularly when it comes to gender performance– is, even in these

recruitment-focused narratives, part of a greater nexus of control that the group's leadership aims

to maintain. Because this particular group aims to both remove agency of individualistic gender

expression from group members and establish a universal group identity for which those

members are expected to "give everything up to do God's will,"[128] group members are therefore

expected to sacrifice their possessions, money, and often even families to pursue what they view

as a "new culture where all things are being restored and the purpose for our lives is being

revealed."[129]

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[128]Twelve Tribes, "Loner."

[129]Twelve Tribes, "Lost and Found."

The aim of this paper is not, as rhetorical scholar Abigail Mooney suggests of anti-cult scholarship, simply appealing to "mainstream fears and prejudices,"[130] nor is my goal to insist upon the brainwashing of recruits. Instead, I hope to have illuminated how, though the formatting of these recruitment narratives is similar to other non-cultic groups, recruitment-focused materials in a cult dynamic are not the only factor in establishing control over group members. Instead, these narratives can be viewed as examples of the group's insular ideology and how agency, particularly over gender enactment, is uniquely repudiated and subsequently surrendered by group members. It is easy to look at these narratives and their authors' attempts to understand their purpose and assume a fault of the members themselves. But in the world at large, the search for purpose is constant. It spares no one.

Cults, especially as they are discussed concerning charismatic leaders and mind-controlled brainless victims, have been sequestered to tabloids and true crime documentaries in the eyes of the public. This is for good reason; cult coverage, even when done well, is frequently used to fuel viewers' senses of superior moral intelligence; *I* would never join a cult. But, as it has become exceedingly clear while compiling and analyzing my research, the rhetoric used to recruit new members cannot "brainwash" anyone on its own. There are, especially in the metanoic narratives of the group's women, very few appeals centered around the group's superior religious doctrine, yet there are consistent mentions of the group's ability to lift potential members out of financial, emotional, and spiritual *purposelessness*. While this does not pertain to the group's expectation of heteronormative and binary gender performance, that, too, is essential to the sense of purpose that the group provides members. If a member is taught that their gender, and the performance of that gender within the group's strict boundaries, is essential to their ability to serve a purpose beyond the suffering and purposelessness of the

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[130]Mooney, *Rhetoric Religious 'Cults,'* 130.

outside world, it is easier to adopt these beliefs and be affirmed in purpose than to perform

gender in a way that simultaneously fulfills their own desires and fails to instill a sense of

contributing to something beyond the self.

It is tempting to do as the author of "I Was A Loner" did and "abandon the barrenness of

this modern world"[131] to devote oneself completely to something that promises easy and

unchanging purpose to its members. But purpose, without "the capacity to act or make a

difference"[132] does not give space for the inherent messiness, the inherent senselessness, the

inherent beauty in finding purpose independently. Similarly, the world at large has decided our

purpose based on the expectations that have been set and reinforced over time of proper gender

performance. We have a decision to make: we either allow a structure beyond us to dictate our

expression and remove our agency while providing us a sense of fulfilled purpose, or we seize

these expectations as a tool to find it ourselves.

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[131]Twelve Tribes, "I Was A Loner."

[132]Foss, *Gender Stories,* 16.

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