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Podcasting in the Christian Peripheries:

Constructing Community in *The Liturgists*, a Post-Evangelical Podcast

by

Emily Catherine Johnson

A THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis studies how *The Liturgists Podcast*, as a community located at the intersection of new media and religion, harnesses the auditory, technical, and creative affordances of podcasting to construct an online public with warm appeal to the progressive proclivities and cultural frameworks of listeners navigating the tenets of their fundamentalist Christian faith traditions. This analysis shows that *TLP* fosters a sense of progressive imagined communion through its use of production decisions and discursive constructions. First, *TLP* draws on podcasting's production affordances to fashion a listening experience that reproduces and occasionally adapts some of the evangelical theological and narrative traditions, frameworks, and practices familiar to its listeners, invoking the common progressive affective and nostalgic sensibilities of a physically dispersed public. Second, the hosts draw on a series of progressive religious, political, and social discourses that they position in contrast to those of the American evangelical mainstream. By privately nurturing intimate connections between individuals with similar preoccupations, then employing discourses to contest the ideologies and practices of mainstream religious systems, *TLP* operates according to Fraser's (1990) notion of a counterpublic (p. 68). However, rather than distancing itself from the Christian tradition altogether, *TLP* constructs its progressive counterpublic primarily through the framework of a return to a new, enlightened Christianity. This novel reimagining calls alienated listeners back with compassion and acceptance to the faith traditions that betrayed them, establishing their place in a longer history of mediated listening centred around hope in the imagined communion offered through the soundwaves of technology (Schultze, 1987, p. 258).

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Table of Contents

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………………..……...ii

Acknowledgments……………………………………………………………………..……………..iii

Table of Contents…………………………………………………………………….……………iv

Chapter One: Introduction………………………………………………………..……………...1

Chapter Two: Literature Review……………………………………………..……………...10

Podcasting: Background, Debates, and Issues……………………………………………………..10

Social, Cultural, and Political Uses of Podcasts…………………..………..…………..………19

Chapter Three: Theory and Methodology……………………………………...…………..…...32

The Politics and Practices of (Counter)Publics: Theorizing Spaces of Discussion and Protest..…....32

Digital Communities: Networked, Affective, and Listening Publics………………………………..40

Remediation: Continuities between Religious Radio and Podcasting Communities............................47

Methodology…………………………………………………………..................................51

Chapter Four: Analysis……………………………………………………………………...…...61

Part A: Constructing a Listening Public…………...…...…61

Production and Formatting Strategies………………..62

Constructing Authority: Highlighting the Hosts' Social Capital and Personal Accomplishments…....62

Fostering Authentic, Grassroots Community………………………………………………..……..72

Invoking and Reimagining Evangelical Narrative Traditions………………...……..…...…..………80

Testimony…………………………………………………………………………….……..80

Speaking in Tongues……………………………………………………………………………...86

Contemplative Reading…………………………………………………………………….......87

Introspection…………………………………………………………………………………...89

Conclusions…………………………………………………………...……………..…..........95

Part B: Constructing Counter-Discourses…………..…........……………...……………….……………..100

Non-Dualism and Religion……………………………….................……….……………101

Race and White Supremacy……………………………………………………..…………..…….112

Sexuality and Gender………………..……………………………………………..................…117

Conclusions……………………………………………………...………….……………..128

Chapter Five: Conclusion………………………………………………………………………134

References……………………………………………………………………………..…...…139

Chapter One: Introduction

I was a practicing evangelical[1] Christian in my early 20s when, in 2014, a popular American husband-and-wife Christian band called Gungor announced that they no longer subscribed to the belief, widely held among many of their listeners, in biblical literalism (Blair, 2018). Gungor's statement was a bold proclamation that their perspectives no longer aligned with the fundamentalist branches of Christianity in which they worked and were raised—communities founded on a belief in the infallibility of the Bible and a literal understanding of its text[2]. Gungor's identity as a Christian band going forward was uncertain, especially within conservative circles. Michael and Lisa Gungor came under intense scrutiny among many North American evangelicals who, as former fans, had previously enjoyed the band's music.

Though I was not a regular listener of Gungor, my high school church friends and I were familiar with their music. I clearly recall the hubbub within my Christian social circles surrounding Gungor's announcement, which precipitated lengthy debates about the ethical parameters of listening to (what some deemed as) an "anti-Christian" and "blasphemous" band. I also recall hearing discussions about pulling Gungor's music from Christian retailers. Although Gungor has since enjoyed success through their newer music and other projects, their announcement permanently impacted their status within the Christian music scene and the wider evangelical community. Since 2014, the band embraced more Christian-spiritualist music labels, with their progressive theologies inviting sustained criticism from the Christian right. Once considered "Christian music royalty," Gungor was ultimately "branded as heretical and banished

[1] Protestant Christianity upholds beliefs about the sinless life of Jesus Christ, the inerrancy and God-given authority of the Bible, and the death of Jesus on to the cross to forgive human sins. Evangelicals believe it is their duty to evangelize (share "the good news" of Jesus) and convert the world to Christianity (The National Association of Evangelicals, n.d.). Conservative forms of evangelicalism are often described as *fundamentalist* to connote adherents' strict allegiance to these fundamental beliefs.
[2] For example, this assumption informs the fundamentalist belief that God created the world in six literal days as the Genesis creation story outlines.

from evangelical Christianity” due to their beliefs (Beach, 2018, para. 1). Gungor had effectively committed “career suicide” overnight, as Michael Gungor (2018) explained in his podcast, *The Liturgists Podcast* (Episode 89).

What this relatively niche anecdote underscores, in part, is the intensity of the hostility that evangelical communities often impart upon those who express doubt or ask questions about the traditional tenets of their faith, at least as I have observed within American and Canadian contexts. Gungor’s initial statement appeared, on the surface, fairly inconsequential: it was an expression of reservation about the historical validity of some seemingly non-essential biblical narratives, such as Noah’s Ark[3]. Yet, for many evangelicals, Gungor’s statement evoked a fear and opposition that is, in my experience, a routine response to expressions of doubt within a religious project that stakes its survival on the certainty of its adherents’ beliefs. This anecdote also highlights the profound price that those questioning their faith often pay for expressing their doubts and seeking honest, critical discussions with their faith communities. Crucially, evangelicals’ pushback against even minor expressions of uncertainty can be deeply alienating for the doubtful, denying them the possibility for genuine connection with friends and leaders in their current social and religious environments. In such a circumstance, some choose to salvage their church relationships by pushing their questions to the side and maintaining a façade of certitude. Others, however, make the devastating decision to leave their communities altogether in pursuit of a space where they can safely voice, and receive support for, their religious questions and concerns.

Several years ago, I made what was, at the time, the complicated and crushing latter decision, choosing to leave my evangelical community and eventually my faith. My decision

[3] The book of Genesis tells the story of Noah’s Ark, in which God instructs a man named Noah to build a large ark in order to protect his family, and at least two of every animal on earth, from a global flood.

stemmed from my inability to reconcile the church's systemic refusal to meaningfully address pressing theological, social, and political concerns, including its longstanding complicity in white supremacist, racist, and sexist systems of oppression. Around the time that I was contemplating leaving, I was lucky to connect with several people from my church, most of whom were acquaintances or friends also going through the beginning stages of their "faith shift."[4] We created our own small group of faith shifters, comprised of approximately ten people, which met every other Saturday evening in one of our homes to share a meal and discuss religion, politics, and various personal topics. The small group provided me with the support, encouragement, and understanding that were so crucial in those early stages of my religious deconstructions[5], and I had the privilege of listening to and supporting those in the group as they walked a similar path. After about a year, I stopped regularly attending our small group gatherings, although most of the original members have continued to meet. My gradual shift away from Christianity meant that I was increasingly uninterested in discussing politics and culture primarily through the lens of the Christian faith, even if the small group did so openly and in a way that I respected and valued. Still, the support I received through my small group during the early days of my faith shift was invaluable; it had a deep impact on my ability to move on and heal from my complicated relationship with my church. Crucially, however, my ability to meet in-person with likeminded and supportive people during my faith transition is a privilege not everyone is afforded. Faith-shifting can be a lonely and painful road at the best of times, with or without an immediate support network. For this reason, I am interested in studying

[4] Kathy Escobar (2014) uses this term in her book *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe is Falling Apart* to describe the process of undergoing a major faith crisis or transition.
[5] Progressive Christian communities often use the term *deconstruction* to refer to the personal project of unraveling deeply engrained religious beliefs and working toward a non-fundamentalist worldview.

how new media provide spaces for people to connect with and receive support from those with similar faith-related experiences, questions, and doubts.

This thesis studies the intersection of new media and religion through a case study of one popular post-Christian[6] podcast, *The Liturgists Podcast* (*TLP*), produced by Michael Gungor. On both their podcast and social media platforms, the producers of *TLP* employ a marketing strategy that underscores the ostensible diversity, openness, and compassion of the community. *The Liturgists*' website, for example, describes the community as a "global" one "working to subvert the barriers our society builds around religion, race, gender, ability, and sexuality" by cultivating a shared connection through "compelling discussion, non-judgmental community, and thoughtful, evocative art" (The Liturgists, 2019, We Are The Liturgists, para. 1). Primarily online (with occasional in-person events, meet-ups, and retreats), *The Liturgists* is a global network for people questioning the beliefs, practices, and impacts of their religious traditions, particularly North American evangelicalism. *The Liturgists* aims to provide support and compassion to those questioning their faith primarily through the conversations and imagined community that the podcast fosters. *The Liturgists* positions itself as a podcast-driven community where people can engage with questions around the themes of "art, science, and faith" (The Liturgists, 2020, A Brief History of The Liturgists), with many podcast episodes focusing on issues of faith, politics, gender, sexuality, race, and science.

[6] *TLP*'s hosts often use the prefix *post-* in descriptions of their community, including "post-deconstructed-faith" (Episode 7), "post-denominational" (Episode 9; Episode 35), and "post-evangelical" (Episode 87). Such phrasing is common among post-evangelicals to denote those who have deconstructed, or are working to deconstruct, their faith (see footnote 5). Post-evangelicals/post-Christians tend to hold progressive social and theological perspectives and are critical of the Christian church's conservativism. Post-evangelicals who also no longer identify as Christian may embrace the label "ex-Christian." I use the terms post-Christian/post-evangelical and ex-Christian in this thesis accordingly.

This project's primary research question is: How do Christian communities use podcasting in support of their progressive ethos and to construct a shared sense of community among its listeners? Two additional questions also inform my analysis:

1. How do *TLP*'s production and formatting choices nurture a shared sense of community among its dispersed listeners?
2. What discursive themes arise throughout *TLP*'s episodes, and how do they contribute to the podcast's construction of a post-Christian community?

Studying the relationship between podcasts and religious communities is important because podcasts may be particularly conducive to the needs of these groups. They are portable, relatively inconspicuous and accessible, and cheap, allowing listeners to connect through voice and sound to a global network of likeminded people. Audiences can exercise some control over their podcasting experience by subscribing to podcasts that appeal to their interests, and they can listen when and where convenient, subverting some of the barriers to access and participation present in other media. When people listen, they can find comfort in knowing that others with some shared understanding of their experience have listened too—allowing groups with similar concerns and interests to ask questions, learn, and grow together. The shared, albeit often asynchronous, experience of listening to a podcast also mirrors some of the characteristics of attending a church service, as both tend to offer thematic, story-oriented narratives as a way to work through a particular set of problems or questions. And, like churches, podcasts can facilitate connections between listeners, who may then try to further connect through other means. Of course, podcasts are also notably dissimilar from traditional sermons and religious communities, given their portability and capacity to reach listeners across great geographical distances. In this thesis, I explore these diverse characteristics and issues of podcasting as they

relate to *TLP*, foregrounding the question of how this community embraces podcasting as a medium in service of its particular post-evangelical ethos.

Podcasts are important artifacts of academic study not only because of their transportability and accessibility, but because they have grown rapidly in popularity since their 2004 inception, due in large part to the evolution of smartphone technology over the past 15 years (Berry, 2016a, p. 661). Yet, despite the increasing ubiquity and cultural familiarity of podcasts, they have not yet received adequate attention among communication and media scholars. As I explain in Chapter Two, this lack of academic attention to podcasts and other predominantly auditory media may stem, in part, from a broad apathy to sound studies rooted in historical assumptions about the superiority of the visual and visible (Bottomley, 2015; Chadha, Avila, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012; Sterne, 2003; Tacchi, 2000). By studying podcasts through a critical media lens, I seek to highlight the possibilities, limitations, and political and discursive effects of a medium that surrounds listeners with "aural imagery" and creates impact through sound (Starkey, 2017, p. 664).

The opening anecdote about the once-beloved Christian band Gungor provides some historical context for the popularity and impact of *The Liturgists Podcast*. I suspect that many American and Canadian (ex-)evangelicals who dedicated significant time to their churches in the early 2010s are at least vaguely familiar with Gungor, if not well aware of the drama surrounding their controversial 2014 statement. For those who have left, or have been tempted to leave, evangelicalism due to irreconcilable theological, social, or political views, Michael and Lisa Gungor's statement, and their subsequent treatment by the church, will personally resonate. I therefore find it likely that many current, questioning, and post-evangelicals who come across *TLP*, hosted by Michael Gungor, will have some sense of insight into the genre and context of

the program before they even listen. Those questioning their evangelical faith might immediately assume, then, that they will find some sense of commiseration and belonging in *TLP*.

This project asks: How do progressive Christian communities use podcasting in support of their progressive ethos and to construct a shared sense of community among its listeners? Chapter Two sets some groundwork for this study by exploring how scholars in communication, media, and technology studies have theorized podcasting over the past 20 years, as well as identifying some of the key issues and debates that have marked the study of podcasts during this time. It also discusses recent podcasting data which illustrate the growing popularity of the medium and suggest that podcasting demographics, especially producers and consumers in the United States, tend to be disproportionately well-educated, wealthy, and otherwise privileged. The final section of this chapter reviews literature that demonstrates a wide range of individual, political, and institutional podcast practices and developments.

Chapter 3 details this project's theoretical and methodological frameworks. First, I outline foundational research by Jürgen Habermas (2006), Nancy Fraser (1990), Benedict Anderson (2006), and Michael Warner (2002). This work broadly discusses the politics and practices of publics and counterpublics, theorizing them as spaces of discussion and protest that can facilitate a shared (socially constructed) sense of community among members. I also review theories of digital communities, focusing on the concepts of "networked publics" (boyd, 2010, p. 39), "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 5), and "listening publics" (Lacey, 2011, p. 6) to show how digital spaces, including sound-based media, facilitate community, emotional bonds, and spaces of connection and participation online. From there, I draw on Bolter and Grusin's (1999) work on remediation to frame a discussion of the continuities between religious radio broadcasting and religious podcasting communities. I focus on the last century or so of American

Protestants' overwhelming enthusiasm of broadcast media for the potential they promised as proselytizing (Christian community-building) tools (Schultze, 1987), and I suggest that podcasting offers similar promises to contemporary religious communities. The final section of Chapter Three discusses this study's methodology. I outline my approach to my study of *The Liturgists Podcast*, including the selection, transcription, and analysis of the podcast episodes. I also introduce the methodological approach of discourse analysis, based in Michel Foucault's (1972; 1979) work on discourse, which provides a framework to study how communities like *The Liturgists* construct a shared sense of communion and belonging. Literature and theoretical work explored in Chapter Two and Chapter Three inform this study's analytical lens. I complete this chapter with a reflection on some of the ethical considerations of studying a community with which I have some personal connection.

Chapter Four details my analysis of *The Liturgists Podcast*. I separate my findings into two main categories: (1) the hosts' production and formatting strategies and (2) the podcast's key religious, social, and political discourses. The first section argues that *TLP* draws on podcasting's technological and creative affordances to curate a listening experience that appeals to the specific religious sensibilities and cultural frameworks of its post-evangelical listeners. The podcast allows listeners to participate in (virtual) communion with dispersed others, therefore fulfilling the first requirement of Fraser's (1990) notion of a counterpublic: to privately nurture intimate connections between individuals with similar preoccupations (p. 68). The second section identifies three major discursive themes that arise through the podcast: non-dualism/religion, race/white supremacy, and sexuality/gender. Through these three frameworks, I demonstrate that *TLP* constructs its post-evangelical ethic primarily by situating its discourses *in opposition* to those of the American evangelical mainstream. In doing so, *TLP* fulfils the second of Fraser's

(1990) requirements of a counterpublic: constructing and employing discourses to contest the ideologies and practices of mainstream systems (p. 68).

In Chapter Five, I conclude this project with a brief summary of my findings. By highlighting recent backlash among *TLP* listeners, I also discuss some of the contradictions inherent in counterpublics and reflect on the politics, practices, and lessons of counterpublics gone awry.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This project seeks to theorize the ways that religious communities use podcasts—a medium largely centred around the transportability of sound and stories—as community-building tools. In this chapter, I explore literature that details the technological, historical, cultural, and political histories and impacts of podcasts, with some focus on sound as crucial to the emotional and political resonance of the medium. I define and historicize podcasting, identifying some of the key academic debates around its development, use, production, and political implications. I also review scholarship that considers how people produce and engage with podcasts to understand their worlds and to construct and partake in community. This chapter illustrates the variety of ways that podcasts become conceptualized and used as community-building tools, a foundation that provides impetus for a study on religious podcast communities.

Podcasting: Background, Debates, and Issues

For more than two decades, radio, sound, and media scholars more generally have drawn attention to the technology and practice of podcasting. In tracing the history of the term itself, writers recognize *The Guardian* journalist Ben Hammersley's brief use of the portmanteau (from the words "pod," referring to the iPod, and "casting," as in broadcasting) in 2004 as the inception of the term that has now become mainstream (Berry, 2016b, p. 8). But Hammersley's seemingly casual and serendipitous coining of the term in order "to meet a journalistic word count" (Berry, 2015, p. 172) did not foreshadow the immense popularity and power that podcasting would quickly accrue in the years ahead.

Levinson (2013) describes podcasting as a sound-based "new new medi[um]" that, like radio, television, and other "older" media, facilitate the sharing, or broadcasting, of content to

large audiences (p. 148). Most listeners experience podcasts as audio shows of assorted length (anywhere from a few minutes to several hours), which are produced by an individual, group, or corporation with interest or expertise in a particular topic or genre, such as politics, comedy, popular culture, and lifestyle. From a mobile phone or computer, users can subscribe to podcasts via a hosting service such as Apple Podcasts to have new episodes automatically downloaded to their device, or they can manually listen to and download episodes from the podcast's website or hosting service. This range of listening options differs markedly from ten to twenty years ago when podcast audiences were largely restricted to their computers and iPods. Today, people can enjoy podcasts virtually whenever and wherever they want, provided they have sufficient Internet and technology with which to listen.

In his earlier research on the topic, Richard Berry (2006), a leading scholar in podcast studies, defined podcasting as "media content delivered automatically to a subscriber via the Internet" (p. 144). While most audiences engage with audio podcasts given the portability of sound, podcasting also has visual affordances, as Hennig (2017) acknowledges in her statement that the medium involves "audio or video files attached to an RSS feed" (p. 5). Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds are key to disseminating podcasts, allowing producers to upload episodes to a hosting service which consumers can then use to download episodes to their devices (Levinson, 2013, p. 151). When listeners subscribe to a podcast, RSS facilitates episodes' automatic download to computers, mobile phones, and other devices. Podcasts thus involve a push-pull relationship between RSS feeds and podcast subscribers, as the technology provides (pushes) episode prompts that users accept (pull) onto their devices (Birch & Weirkamp, 2010, p. 891). Stated differently, RSS "relieves subscribers of the requirement to look for new content every time they go online; the content comes to them instead" (Sterne,

Morris, Baker, & Freire, 2008, para. 3). RSS is crucial to podcasting's easy consumption and to its ultimate uniqueness and success as a medium; Bottomley (2015) notes that RSS "implies seriality" and "distinguishes podcasting from streaming audio and a plethora of other downloadable audio media files online" (p. 166). For this reason, some scholars have contested the claim that podcasting functions primarily as a form of radio broadcasting (Berry, 2006).

There is a longstanding impulse in communication studies to interrogate the "new" of "new media." As I will discuss in greater detail in the context of religious radio broadcasting in Chapter Three, Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of remediation has offered a useful framework for analyzing how a medium's aesthetics, practices, and technologies get reproduced in subsequent ones, digital or otherwise (see also Heise, 2014). Remediation discussions were especially prevalent around the early years of the twenty-first century, but media and communication scholars have continued to take up these theories, particularly in discussion of their applicability to "newer" media (see Black, 2001; Bottomley, 2015; Coyle, 2000; Hartley, 2000; Lacey, 2008; Markman & Sawyer, 2014; Starkey, 2017; and Tacchi, 2000). Media scholars have historicized podcasting in particular to consider its continuities and disconnections from preceding media (Starkey, 2017), with some identifying the parallels between podcasting and radio specifically. Bottomley (2015) argues that much of what is exciting about podcasts' capacity to inspire new creative work and cultivate intimate auditory spaces is actually rooted in the practices and aesthetics of traditional radio (p. 186). Heise (2014) agrees, noting that "the centrality of voice [in podcasting] draws a direct line to radio talk" (p. 4). At the same time, he also notes that podcast hosts tend to adopt a friendlier and more casual tone than radio hosts, adding to the distinctiveness of each medium's listening experience:

> While some podcasters adopt a more professionalized, 'radiogenic' style of talking, … his or her personality and opinions play an important role in many podcasts. Free from

> the restrictions and conventions of media talk (and a regulating or censoring institution), many podcasts comprise spontaneous, unscripted, unconventional, and 'non-professional' talk: by addressing the listener directly, sharing information of their everyday life, ranting about annoying experiences, or making politically incorrect jokes, these podcasts provide content that is normally unheard of in mainstream radio (p. 4)

Nyre (2015) highlights how radio and podcasting programs have different "built-in position[s] for listeners to take up," with hosts addressing an imagined audience differently depending on the affordances of a particular medium (p. 282). Live radio hosts, for example, position individual listeners as unique, responsible subjects:

> The host speaks to you as an individual someone, but at the same time thousands of other people also feel that they are addressed as someone special. Listeners are supposed to be socially and politically engaged in the topics under debate, and for example call on the phone or take part in a quiz. The listener is furthermore positioned as being a responsible citizen, with a thirst for knowledge and understanding. (p. 282)

He adds that podcasters seek to "enlighten" or educate their listeners in a way similar to traditional radio programs, appealing to those with interest in the discussion matter (p. 282-283). Podcasts also differ from traditional radio broadcasting in that audiences can, and often do, access programs hours and days after their recording. According to Nyre, "podcasts are recorded and can be accessed voluntarily," so "they don't have the same focus on shared concerns as live radio" (p. 282). Podcast hosts are aware of the medium's built-in asynchrony and construct their programs accordingly (p. 282).

Others argue that podcasting facilitates new forms of participation, creation, and interactivity that distinguish it from traditional broadcast media. For Birch and Weirkamp (2010), podcasting "caters for niche audiences" with specific interests and needs, aligning more with the theory that the Internet is "made up of millions of tiny hamlets" rather than that of the "global village" commonly invoked in media discourse (p. 891). Likewise, Heise (2014) notes that podcasts disseminate messages to niche (narrow) listening communities, rather than to

audiences of up to millions as broadcasting tends to do (p. 3). By tailoring messages to a specific program audience, podcasting as narrowcasting encourages intimate connection between listeners and hosts, including through interaction via social media and phone calls. Podcasts are not fully linear, preformulated texts; as Heise (2014) notes, "[d]espite the presumably unidirectional nature of the pre-recorded podcast episodes, listener interaction and feedback are strongly intended and actually take place" (p. 2)[7]. Audience participation, creation, and engagement is therefore key to podcasting. By interacting with one's podcast community online, audiences can personally impact the content of the podcast itself because podcasts are "continuously negotiated between podcaster and listeners," with "listeners and fans … directly participating in the co-creation of content" (Heise, 2014, p. 5). In this view, podcasting involves more interactivity than traditional radio broadcasting, with the latter's tendency toward one-way, top-down processes of gatekeeping.

Recent research confirms the increasing popularity of podcasting in North America. Edison Research (2019a) estimates that 70% of Americans are familiar with podcasting (compared to 22% in 2006) and that 51% of Americans have listened to a podcast episode (compared to 11% in 2006). Notably, over 50% of Americans over the age of 12 have listened to a podcast, a development that one researcher describes as "a watershed moment for podcasting—a true milestone" that proves podcasting "has firmly crossed into the mainstream" (Webster, as cited in Edison Research, 2019b, para. 2). The increasing power and success of podcasts worldwide is also reflected in that fact that, as of 2018, audiences had downloaded and streamed podcasts 50 billion times from Apple Podcasts (Fast Company, 2018), which researchers call

[7] Heise's contention recalls Morris, Hansen, and Hoyt's (2019) discussion of "dynamic advertising" and "content insertion," in which podcasters can insert new advertisements into old episodes (p. 17). The manipulability of audio programs challenges claims of the permanency and objectivity of podcasts and other digital texts.

"the dominant podcatcher" (Birch & Weitkamp, 2010, p. 893). Apple also announced in 2018 that it hosts more than 550,000 podcasts (Podcast Insights, 2019).

Podcasting's increasing popularity over the past two decades is attributed, in part, to the ease with which podcasts can be produced and consumed. Berry (2006) claims that, in contrast to some of the technological, intellectual, and economic barriers surrounding traditional broadcasting, "[a]nyone can create a podcast" due to the relative simplicity and cheapness of producing and disseminating them (p. 145). Listeners are also afforded considerable power and flexibility in their podcast listening:

> The listener is now in charge of the broadcast schedule choosing what to listen to, when, in what order and – perhaps most significantly – where. Effectively there is a move in power from programmers to listeners. Although the producers still maintain control over content the listeners make decisions over scheduling and the listening environment and that is a fundamental change for producers of radio content. (p. 145)

Scholars refer to the flexibility and transportability of podcasting—the "anytime, anywhere" listenability of audio—as "time-shifting" (Bottomley, 2015, p. 166). The RSS feed facilitates this process by automatically downloading new episodes onto people's devices so that they can consume podcasts at any time without an Internet connection (Hennig, 2017, p. 5). The widespread adoption of the smartphone in the last ten years, and the increasing ease of downloading audiovisual files via websites and mobile applications, have also had a significant impact on podcasting's popularity. Hennig's (2017) brief chapter "Why Podcasts?" outlines some of the unique characteristics that distinguish podcasts from other popular media and that have contributed to their success. Focusing on audio texts in particular due to their popularity and transportability, she notes that podcasts are often free to access due to advertising and that listeners can subscribe to podcasts that pique their interest, listening "whenever it's convenient" (p. 6). Accessibility and control over one's listening are key themes in the podcasting literature,

having contributed to a considerable wave of scholarly enthusiasm about the medium's democratic potential. This sentiment has persisted since Berry (2006) spoke endearingly of podcasting's "disruptive" possibilities almost 15 years ago (p. 144).

Berry's (2006) early scholarship is notable for bringing podcasting and its technical, political, historical, and social issues to researchers' attention at a time when the emerging medium was not high on the academy's agenda. However, he later acknowledged the premature enthusiasm underlying his initial vision of podcasting as a democratic medium transforming the mediascape, describing it as "an ideal that is yet to be fully achieved" (Berry, 2016a, p. 663). Still, Berry (2016a) remains optimistic about the potential of increasingly sophisticated podcast technology to offer new, creative outlets to make a living and to facilitate producing and disseminating information that can help establish digital communities (p. 664). He notes that "[t]en years on from the birth of the podcasting movement, far from killing off radio, podcasting has had a positive impact, offering new opportunities for flexible listening, format innovation and revenue" (p. 664). Hennig (2017) agrees, claiming "[t]here is something for everyone in the world of podcasts," with virtually endless possibilities in terms of genre, style, and content (p. 6). In contrast to mainstream radio broadcasting, which has traditionally involved a host of economic, technological, intellectual, and temporal barriers to production and participation (Berry, 2015), individuals now have considerable opportunities to produce and share their own digital projects, sometimes with great success. People also have access to podcasts on a wide range of topics, including politics, business, sports, education, and religion, with audio programs in particular allowing them to listen while they engage in everyday activities (Hennig, 2017, p. 7). Given podcasting's lack of regulation and the affordance of editorial control, producers have flexibility to craft a program that suits the needs of their project and community (Vrikki &

Malik, 2019, p. 282). Podcast hosts also tend to develop networks to lend credibility to and garner financial support for other podcasters' programs (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 278).

Scholars have pointed to podcasting's lack of regulation as a factor that informs its unique technical and social capacities as well as the medium's significant growth more generally over the past fifteen years (Hennig, 2017, p. 5). Podcasting's regulatory status informs a sense of producer and consumer freedom, particularly considering the rules and regulations that surround traditional radio production and dissemination. Berry (2016b) explains that, in contrast to radio, podcasting "is both free of all regulatory control and management interference, and grants the ability to perform on one's own schedule" (p. 9). Ultimately, podcast production is more flexible, and audio programs are more mobile, than those of traditional media. Therefore, producers have more options in the production and dissemination of their work, while listeners can ostensibly develop a dynamic relationship with this "new" technology as they listen to episodes (and pause, rewind, and fast forward them) when and where they wish.

Of course, there are important caveats to claims about podcasting's status as a democratic medium with (nearly) endless possibilities for connection and action. Research shows that people who listen to podcasts tend to be disproportionately well-educated and wealthy, presumably with reliable (access to) technology as well as the time and income necessary to regularly consume and engage with digital media (Audience Insights & Ulster Media, 2019, p. 9). Dubber (2013) highlights these class dynamics, noting that podcasting tends to be a "niche consumption activity for the 'prosumer flaneur'" (as cited in Heise, 2014, p. 3). Technological, economic, and intellectual barriers can also prevent some people from engaging fully and equally with podcasts (Birsch & Weitkamp, 2010, p. 891). Finally, Vrikki and Malik (2019) note that podcasting is part

of a larger media landscape rife with structural barriers that undermine and push to the margins the cultural work of people of colour in particular (p. 274).

The increasing popularity of podcasts in North America and globally has not resulted in parallel interest among critical media, technology, and sound scholars. Bottomley (2015) observes that much podcast research is outdated and that the field of media studies would benefit from a more concerted focus on the politics, cultures, and practices of podcasting and its audiences (p. 165). Chadha, Avila, and Gil de Zúñiga (2012) identify a similar problem regarding research on people's engagement with podcasts (p. 389). Further stressing this deficit, I have noticed that some publications on new media are surprisingly quiet about podcasts. For example, Carey and Elton's (2010) book, *When Media are New: Understanding the Dynamics of New Media Adoption and Use*, contains just two short paragraphs on the topic, and it does not do any work to explore the cultural, political, or historical implications of podcasting (p. 299-300).

The cause of this research deficit is complex, going beyond a simple disinterest in podcasting. In *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Sterne (2003) discusses the influence of western modernity discourses in creating a cultural belief where sight surpasses hearing as the dominant sense. He rejects these discourses, arguing that "sound, hearing, and listening are foundational to modern modes of knowledge, culture, and social organization" (p. 2). Tacchi (2000) also underscores historical and cultural constructions of technology, illustrating how its meanings change across time and space (p. 293). She argues for the need to study online radio in particular since "[i]t is a part of domestic soundscapes" and can provide insight into "contemporary domestic life" and the political, social, and cultural contexts in which technology is employed (p. 291). Sterne and Tacchi make a similar case for unsettling western assumptions about the primacy of the visual. They also call for a broadening of the

scholarly imagination to (re)consider discourses and practices surrounding the auditory, and to work toward more culturally and historically situated understandings of sound and its histories and effects. If, as Tacchi (2000) suggests, media texts from a particular historical moment give insight into the lives of their producers and consumers, podcasts have much to teach us about contemporary social, cultural, and political preoccupations, as well as how people use the medium to pursue different ways of knowing, feeling, and experiencing the world. The next section considers some of these diverse uses of podcasts by reviewing literature that highlights current scholarly trends as well as areas of need for continued research.

Social, Cultural, and Political Uses of Podcasts

Media scholarship considers the diverse contexts and uses of podcasts as well as their social and political implications. Some studies employ uses and gratifications frameworks to consider audiences as active in their consumption of podcasts. Boling and Hull (2018) study true crime podcast audiences and the motivations for their related online engagement. To do so, they analyze the results of 308 online surveys distributed via related Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook pages. The authors conclude that true crime podcast listeners are active in their podcast use, particularly as they tend to discuss episodes with others online (p. 105). However, these findings are limited by the fact that the survey was administered through online platforms where such "active" podcast listeners already congregate (p. 105). McClung and Johnson (2010) also analyze 354 online surveys administered to Facebook and MySpace fan groups related to the top 20 iTunes podcasts in 2008. They find that most listeners have high incomes and levels of education. They also observe that listeners enjoy podcasts for entertainment, for their "timeshifting" capacities (the ability to listen whenever they want), for the ability to build up

one's podcast collection or library, and for the ability to discuss the podcast with fellow fans (p. 89, 91). On the other hand, Wrather (2016) studies the way hosts of the *Maximum Fun* network encourage engagement with their relatively small audience in three podcast episodes. He observes that this engagement leads to interaction in other online forums and media platforms, helping to establish "community and camaraderie" beyond the soundwaves of the podcast (p. 58). Others, such as Markman (2011) and Markman and Sawyer (2014), focus on the motivations of podcast producers themselves. Both studies administer online surveys to evaluate independent podcasters' motivations for creating their podcasts. These findings are similar to McClung and Johnson's (2010), as they observe that producers tend to be privileged and are driven by the social potential of podcasting communities.

Others study podcasting as a medium for people traditionally excluded from official spaces and modes of historical and cultural inquiry. Salvati (2015) examines how one podcaster, Dan Carlin of *Dan Carlin's Hardcore History*, engages in historical podcasting as an amateur, rather than formally trained, historian (p. 231). Rather than dismissing such perspectives as minor due to lack of formal training, Salvati's work challenges academic and popular assumptions about who can "do" history and in what spaces, particularly at a moment in which many people participate in discussions online (p. 232). Podcasts, Salvati claims, provide spaces where non-experts and casual enthusiasts can learn about, construct, and contest historical narratives "from below," ultimately engaging in historical inquiry and critical analysis on their own terms (p. 236). Here, Salvati "takes seriously the sophisticated awareness of historical discourse displayed by many of these do-it-yourself (DIY) historymakers, and invites us to consider how historical knowledge in the twenty-first century is accessed, received, processed, and interpreted by publics beyond walled academic gardens" (p. 232). While this study focuses

on history podcasts, it raises questions about the capacity of enthusiasts in other fields, such as theology and science, to use digital media to engage in cultural and historical inquiry.

A common theme in the literature is the use of storytelling to create an engaging and active podcast listening experience. Dowling and Miller (2019) note that while podcasters employ some of the formal audio techniques found in mainstream radio, they usually draw more heavily on storytelling as a way to engage audiences (p. 169). They argue that podcasts are uniquely "immersive digital media" due in part to their storytelling capacities, which engage listeners' ears and intellect to create "a sense of 'being there'" (p. 170). Podcasting facilitates such listening experiences because it is "a distraction-free medium that encourages [listeners'] absorption in it" (p. 171). These findings align with Lindgren's (2016) work on the affective impact of podcast stories. Through analysis of three U.S.-based podcasts, she argues that personal narratives allow listeners to "explore [their] lives through sounds and spoken words, intimately whispered into [their] ears" (p. 24). Lindgren notes that hosts' friendly and familiar tone contributes to podcasts' storytelling aesthetic (p. 30) and helps elicit affect and empathy (p. 31). These findings are important, she notes, because storytelling is an increasingly popular podcast genre, particularly in the United States (p. 36). However, she cautions that while stories can evoke powerful emotions and inspire connection, centring such intimate details of people's lives risks exploiting them (p. 38). Lindgren's research draws attention to the way podcasts, as flexible, transportable, and sound- and story-based media, engage listeners intimately, allowing them to empathize and connect with others and better understand their experiences (p. 27).

Some scholars study storytelling as a productive tool for producers of non-fiction podcasts to draw attention to the lived political realities of marginalized groups. Zehelein (2019) examines the political power of storytelling and autobiography in the *Not by Accident* podcast,

which highlights the intricacies of single motherhood and the patriarchal and heteronormative discourses surrounding it. She observes that when the host tells intimate stories of her personal life, she creates community, activism, and solidarity with and for people in similar situations (p. 145). In doing so, Zehelein points to the political potential of podcasts, arguing that they are "much more than just a digital media tool. Through their oral/aural nature podcasts perform transcultural work in sonic form and within digital media" (p. 144). The power of podcasts, she argues, lies in their small-scale, grassroots nature, as the intimacy of these spaces facilitates connection between "the similarly minded" (p. 145). Relatedly, Biewen (2010) examines how documentary radio programs "use sound to tell *true* stories *artfully*" (p. 5). He argues that this genre of storytelling taps into a realm of political life that often evades mainstream reports by thoughtfully attending to elements of the mundane and the personal while underscoring the political, social, and economic injustices of people's lives (p. 5). Finally, Vrikki and Malik (2019) consider how Black and Asian British podcasters engage with their communities and pursue their online creative work, particularly in the face of ongoing racial tensions in the United Kingdom. They draw on Fraser's (1990) concept of "subaltern counterpublics" to show how marginalized groups use podcasts both for having intimate conversations and for challenging mainstream media portrayals and systems of oppression on a public platform that others can listen to (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 285). They also highlight the "recurrent contradictions" of countering hegemonic assumptions about race through a medium that is built on racial inequalities, raising questions about the degree to which podcasting changes dominant power structures (p. 285). Vrikki and Malik's work is ultimately optimistic, though, in that it sees the podcasting work of marginalized groups as productive for engaging in collective struggle and solidarity and for "broker[ing] the relationship between marginalised communities and wider

publics" (p. 274). These studies are unanimous in their contention that podcasts are powerful tools for community-building and raising awareness of groups' unique needs and experiences.

Others explore how podcasts can help listeners and producers contend with contemporary political affairs. Park's (2017) research on citizen news podcasts in South Korea highlights how "humor, satire, and parody" allow citizens to challenge and resist dominant political systems through the formation of counterpublic spaces (p. 246, 248). These spaces may be particularly cathartic for disillusioned young people who otherwise "cannot find outlets to vent their anger from depressing economic and political situations," so seek relief through the critical, sarcastic, humorous "unrestrained lampoons" of the podcast (p. 257). This research aligns with Chadha, Avila, and Gil de Zúñiga's (2012) findings, based on results from 1159 online surveys conducted after the 2008 American presidential election, on the relationship between podcast use and political participation. Despite the fact that podcasts tend to facilitate more individualistic and niche, rather than collective, listening practices (as highlighted in the discussion on narrowcasting), the authors discover a positive relationship between podcast use and engagement in political processes "such as voting, attending political events, participating in campaigns, and donating to civic issues" (p. 396-397). These authors draw attention to how podcasts can provide impetus for citizens to learn about, challenge, and collectively intervene in political life.

Podcasts can also function as tools to help people make sense of themselves and the world around them (Weiner, 2014), a capacity that several scholars attribute to the centrality of sound itself. Starkey (2017) discusses how podcasts' "aural imagery" surrounds listeners to evoke emotion without necessarily requiring their sustained attention (p. 664). On the other hand, Florini (2012) studies how the "Chitlin' Circuit," a group of Black American podcasters, use headphones to surround themselves with the sounds of Black voices and environments. In this

study, Black listeners evoke spaces of Black solidarity, or “audio enclaves” (p. 214), by “cocooning themselves in the sounds of Black sociality as they navigate a hegemony that constitutes white culture as normative” (p. 210). Florini locates these podcasts’ emotional impact in the all-encompassing nature of sound, a phenomenon that “closely mimics the kinds of conversation that traditionally happens in Black social spaces like the barber/beauty shop or churches” (p. 215). This research considers how podcast sounds and stories can impact listeners’ understanding of themselves, their histories, and the physical world. An episode’s surround-sound can evoke a listening experience that is particularly powerful for marginalized groups, activating memories and imaginations that can invite solidarity and community around shared experiences and help listeners negotiate a sense of identity.

Scholars have also studied how podcasters discursively construct and engage with their audiences, as well as the impact of these discourses on the broader media landscape. Cwynar (2019) notes that reality podcasts often draw on radio’s storytelling conventions to activate a sense of identification and empathy among listeners (p. 320). However, these affective ties actually encourage listeners to conceive of themselves more in individual, rather than collective, terms, an impulse rooted in the western ideologies of neoliberalism and meritocracy (p. 320-321). These frameworks emerge in the encouragement and celebration of podcasters with the determination ostensibly needed to succeed socially and financially, a feat largely possible in today’s digital-commercial context through “the commoditization of the self through the development and maintenance of the personal brand” (p. 321). What these ideologies mask, however, is that few podcasters (are able to) achieve what these frameworks seem to straightforwardly promise. Those podcasters who do reach “success” tend to have substantial social capital rooted less in “how hard one works than who, and what, one knows” (p. 330). The

author notes that neoliberal logics infiltrate the podcasting landscape, generating an even deeper disjuncture between those who create and those who listen:

> What once appeared to be an open and participatory RSS-based format is now evolving into a medium that is increasingly professionalized and oriented towards a group of rising walled-garden services. In this new context, the gap between the producing minority and the listening majority grows ever wider. Possession of convertible social and cultural capital becomes even more important in this context given the difficulties inherent in achieving access to these new platforms (p. 329-330)

Similarly, Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo (2019) note that while podcasts tend to promote deliberation among public audiences, "they do so in a hyper-competitive, neoliberalized space that prizes above all the attention given by individualized listeners to specific creators willing to put some version of their intimate selves on display" (p. 269-270)[8]. Both articles raise questions about the extent to which podcasts facilitate equitable production and engagement processes, as well as how podcasters feed into the discursive moulding of a medium imbedded in broader neoliberal discourses and social-economic inequalities.

Sharon and John (2019) also study podcasting's discursive effects in their study of *NPR*'s *Invisibilia* podcast and its paratexts. In contrast to much podcasting research that looks at audience practices, these authors primarily examine how the hosts imagine and construct their audiences relative to their engagement with two sets of documents: a so-called "party kit" and "adult coloring pages" (p. 334, 335). The hosts promote these documents as tools that fans can use as they listen to and engage with the podcast in the presence of their friends (p. 335). This analysis highlights the disjunctions between the hosts' discursive constructions of eager,

[8] Murray (2019) discusses how podcasting gained popularity in a media environment in which performances of authenticity and intimacy (for example, by posting personal photographs or stories) are both commonplace and strategic (p. 304). The work of media "influencers" and online (micro)celebrities demonstrates the normalization and internalization of this digital-entrepreneurial culture (p. 304). While emphasizing one's work and entrepreneurialism may cultivate some degree of intimacy, basing the motivation for that intimacy in one's personal economic objectives "may or may not support a diversification of the industry and its listening publics" (p. 313).

available listeners—those who they imagine as "sensitive, creative, capable of critical thinking, imaginative, in touch with their feelings, familiar with therapeutic talk, and highly communicative"—and the actual experiences of busy listeners distracted by the stresses and responsibilities of their daily lives (p. 344). Sharon and John explain how these discourses support myths about podcasting as an enlightened medium and practice, despite the very ordinary circumstances in which most people usually engage:

> When podcasts are associated with vulnerability, intimacy, and the other qualities of 'podcastness', then even if we consume them while washing the dishes or driving to work, as we used to consume radio, we may nonetheless perceive them differently. The ILPK [*Invisibilia* Listening Party Kit] and coloring pages are but one illustration of how such myths take the medium of podcasting out of the realm of the companionship and into the realm of mentorship, of self-improvement, of therapeutic communication, which ultimately gives podcasts their aura as an elite cultural practice. (p. 344)

This research showcases how hosts discursively construct listeners and their listening practices by tapping into Cwynar's (2019) notion of the responsible citizen seeking self-improvement through hard work and dedication (in Sharon and John's case, to a structured listening regime).

Scholars also consider podcasting's mobility as crucial to its capacity to cultivate new intellectual connections and listening experiences. MacDougall (2011) draws on work by Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan to frame a discussion of the spatial and cognitive experiences of the mobile podcast listener. He argues that these audiences participate in a type of "secondary orality" in which, surrounded by the (digital) sound of the speaker, their imaginations and intellect are engaged in novel ways because they can move through and experience the world as they listen:

> [The podcast listener] now makes 'all kinds of connections' precisely because she is not there. Mobile podcasts allow the incorporation of any kind of observation into people's everyday lives in new ways. It might be this new disconnect between the people and places where utterances are produced and where and by whom they are experienced that adds new breadth, depth, power, and force to the significant citizen or opinion leader, modern versions of the village elder, mystic, or seer. (p. 725)

In this view, podcasts, in their mobility, can reorient listeners to space and time by allowing them to actively integrate the senses into their media experience. These mobile experiences facilitate new ways of understanding the world and imbue hosts with a sort of mystical status as they speak into people's (mobile) lives. This work evokes Raymond Williams' pre-Internet notion of "mobile privatization," a term he used to describe mobile technologies that facilitate new forms of sociality through engagement with private media in public space (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 22).

Bull (2005) studies the way people take varying degrees of control over the playlists on their iPods, and how this technology use facilitates a listening experience with particular social and emotional effects as people surround themselves with the sound of their music while navigating urban space. He draws on work by Theodor Adorno to discuss the modern, "urban subject as increasingly and actively seeking out forms of mediated company within which to live" (p. 346). He situates the everyday iPod listener as someone who takes in the sound from their earbuds as they move through busy city life. This listening-moving process serves as a way for individuals to actively (re)construct and engage with both their social and internal worlds, and to reformulate their experience within space and time. Bull says the iPod facilitates "aesthetic colonization"—a phenomenon similar to the "cocooning" effect discussed earlier—since "[s]ound colonises the listener but is also used to actively recreate and reconfigure the spaces of experience" (p. 350). The iPod's soundscapes blur the line between one's self and one's outside context, contributing to a sense in which "[t]he world becomes one with the experience of the iPod user" (p. 351). Elsewhere, Bull (2010) discusses iPods' capacity to facilitate "[m]ediated aural proximity" (p. 62), which, in Horkheimer and Adorno's words, reinforces "an illusion of immediacy in a totally mediated world, of proximity between strangers" (as cited in Bull, 2010, p. 62). While Bull's research seems to reflect much of

MacDougall's (2011) argument in terms of podcasting's impact on listeners' physical, mental, and social experiences, his position is generally more critical of the illusory sense of connection that the digital facilitates, a position that I have also highlighted in the work of Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo (2019). Bolter and Grusin (1999) raise a similar critique, noting that contemporary hypermediated technologies generate a sense of immediacy "by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation" in the first place (p. 11).

Other researchers have identified issues related to podcast engagement and production. Birch and Weitkamp (2010) conduct a content analysis of six weeks of episodes from five science podcasts as well as comments posted to related online forums. They also interview listeners to get an understanding of their experiences as consumers of science podcasts. The authors observe that technological, economic, and psychological barriers can prevent people from engaging with podcasts (p. 891). They also argue that podcast audiences' relatively infrequent online participation is a consequence of the very characteristics that are usually praised for making the medium more accessible. For example, consuming podcasts while engaging in other activities, often considered an affordance of the medium, can distract and prevent people from reaching out online at the moment that something piques their interest:

> Portability is clearly a benefit for listeners in terms of access to podcasts; however, it acts as a barrier to contributing to online discussion forums. Listeners must access the internet to contribute to IODFs [integrated online discussion forums] and are not usually positioned to do so while listening to the podcast itself; by the time of their next internet visit they will have forgotten or lost the inclination. In this sense, some of the listener-control aspects of podcasts touted as advantages could actually act as disadvantages in terms of creating discussion about science topics and this may limit the potential of podcasts to stimulate meaningful discussion on their associated online discussion forums. (p. 905)

Another noteworthy observation from this study is the rate at which hosts, considered podcasts' "experts," engage in online discussions. While their feedback and engagement often contribute

meaningfully to conversations since they can elaborate on content explored in episodes and participate in critical discussion with fans, the creators' presence and "expertise may reinforce existing hierarchies between scientific experts, the media and listeners" (p. 906). Cwynar's (2015) analysis of *CBC*'s *Radio 3* podcast underscores similar issues. He notes that more people consume than create podcasts, reinforcing barriers of access and participation that exist across the general media landscape (p. 191). Both studies interrogate claims of podcasting's democratic potential, particularly its purported ability to encourage open and accessible knowledge-sharing and to facilitate community-building among hosts and listeners. These issues are particularly relevant given the increased sophistication of smartphone technologies and the popularity of social media platforms like Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook to discuss and debate podcasts.

In this chapter, I have defined podcasts and outlined some of the major intellectual discussions and debates about their social, political, technological, and economic uses and impacts. This literature review illustrates the diversity of ways that scholars have conceptualized and historicized podcasts, at times highlighting their novel, "narrower" characteristics and at other times situating them as a more mobile extension of older broadcast media. Some authors consider podcasts as intimate and personal media with profound political possibilities, especially for marginalized listeners, and others emphasize the connection and community-building that podcasts can facilitate among people with similar experiences and interests. Weaving through much of this research is a recognition, often explicit, of the personal and political impacts of a heavily sound-based, mobile, and increasingly ubiquitous medium. In some instances, authors position the sound of the podcast itself as a key rhetorical and affective force that envelopes its listeners, providing impetus to feel, think, and act in personally significant and politically productive ways. In this sense, podcasts are mobilizing agents: they often speak to individuals in

the intimacy and triviality of their daily lives, yet it is through these ostensibly ordinary encounters that listeners can connect to others within a larger social, cultural, and/or political network, sometimes spurring collective thought, solidarity, and action.

Still, others approach a discussion of podcasting with a bit more caution, noting that the technophilic discourses that have persisted in much of podcast research over the past two decades have not necessarily come to fruition in terms of the medium's current accessibility, researchability, production, and participation dynamics. As I have discussed, Cwynar (2019) explains that what was, in its early days, often hailed as revolutionary and democratic has evolved into a platform marked by increasing disparities between creators and listeners (p. 329-330). Similarly, Sullivan (2019) notes that the recent dominance of a few podcasting platforms—notably, those by Apple, Spotify, and Google—has begun to fundamentally change how people produce, disseminate, and access podcasts. While discovering podcasts through "centralized repositories" seems beneficial for audiences navigating an otherwise crowded media landscape, these platforms also give corporate giants further access to listeners' data (p. 9). Podcasters may initially benefit from a greater selection of platforms, but Sullivan cautions that platform consolidation will eventually leave independent producers with far fewer choices of where to create and disseminate their work (p. 10).

Podcasting as a medium and a practice continues to develop within an always-evolving capitalist media and technology environment; it is therefore difficult to predict the future of podcasting based strictly on current developments and the projections of earlier research. For example, two decades of accolades about the "open architecture" RSS feed, which facilitates podcasting's accessible and dynamic listening practices, did not anticipate Sullivan's (2019) more recent observation that "commercial pressures and the desire of market players to capitalize

on the 'winner-take-all' features of platforms are shaping the trajectory of the medium's current development" (p. 2). This is not necessarily to insinuate that the future of podcasting is grim. People continue to employ podcasts to contest power inequalities and reimagine political realities—practices that I suspect will persist despite platformization and the other developments that will take place around them. What these findings do suggest, however, is that podcasting continues to be in flux, despite the way our literatures and discourses can sometimes cement a particular vision of a medium firmly within our individual and collective consciousness. The next chapter builds on some of the themes and tensions introduced in this literature review by drawing on key communication and media theories that will assist in analyzing religious podcasting as a community-building tool and practice.

Chapter Three: Theory and Methodology

Chapter Two highlighted some of the ways that producing, transmitting, and listening to podcasts can facilitate independent and communal listening practices with personal, social, and political implications. In this chapter, I draw on work in media and communication studies that broadly theorizes where and under what circumstances various publics, both physical and virtual, may organize and deliberate, including in protest or opposition to a larger movement or set of circumstances. I also take up the concept of remediation to show that religious podcasting communities have some historical precedent in evangelical radio broadcasting. Through a delineation of some key communication theories on publics and counterpublics, this chapter suggests that religious podcasting in particular can be theorized as a community-building practice with important implications for creating, contesting, and reimagining religious and political alliances—both mainstream and peripheral—within virtual-auditory spaces. Finally, I outline this project's methodological framework in the last section of this chapter.

The Politics and Practices of (Counter)Publics: Theorizing Spaces of Discussion and Protest

Jürgen Habermas' (2006) 1960s work on the public sphere, in which he famously discussed the evolution of spaces of discussion and debate within Europe, has garnered sustained interest and popularity among media scholars. Habermas (2006) noted that in the 18th and 19th centuries, discursive public spaces and mass media outlets such as coffee shops and newspapers began to gain popularity, ultimately replacing the once-asymmetrical deliberative processes and "arcane policies of monarchies" (p. 74) with public forums more conducive to discussion and debate about social and political issues among citizens (Kellner & Durham, 2006a, p. xviii). These newer practices were part of what Habermas called "the bourgeois public sphere," a space where

(privileged) individuals could discuss public (rather than private) issues and question societal systems on their own terms (p. xviii). For Habermas (2006), newspapers and other mass media initially augmented these deliberative processes by acting as mediators between individuals and their leaders and providing insight into contemporary social and political affairs (p. 75). Habermas' (2006) vision of the bourgeois public sphere was therefore particularly egalitarian; he framed these spaces as ones marked by freedom of information and access, as well as by a capacity for democratic, critical deliberation:

> Access is guaranteed to all citizens. … Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. (p. 73)

The development of democratic spaces of public deliberation within Europe signaled a significant and unprecedented shift in power between individuals and the state, allowing citizens to "organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public authority" and challenge the systems they deemed unjust (Kellner & Durham, 2006a, p. xviii).

Habermas' work has maintained currency among contemporary scholars, even sparking renewed interest for studying digital spaces as realms with democratic possibilities and limitations. However, his work has been no stranger to criticism. Some note, for example, that Habermas' writing obscured the actual inequalities of the burgeoning European public sphere that he theorized, which unsurprisingly tended to be "dominated by white, property-owning males" (Kellner & Durham, 2006b, p. 6). Feminist scholars have long observed that Habermas' public sphere theory fails to address the realities of marginalized groups, particularly for women and people of colour who faced, then as now, notable barriers to equal access and participation within the bourgeois public sphere. Given this reality, there is a strange irony to Habermas' insistence on the accessibility of a space that was not so for a significant part of the population;

as Fraser (1990) aptly notes, “declaring a deliberative area to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so” (p. 60). Ultimately, Habermas upheld the white, male-dominated, upper-class bourgeois public sphere as the ideal model of a democratic deliberative system. In doing so, he ignored these groups’ exclusionary practices and erased the political struggles of less privileged and less visible publics and counterpublics during the same period (Calhoun, 1992, p. 5; Fraser, 1990, p. 58-59).

As Nancy Fraser (1990) discusses in her chapter “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Habermas’ theorization does not account for the fact that various publics and counterpublics operated alongside and in opposition to the bourgeois public sphere; indeed, it is this failure to account that explains his myopic “[idealization of] the liberal public sphere” in the first place (p. 61). She notes that while the social, cultural, and political practices and biases of Habermas’ “bourgeois masculinist” public certainly impacted the ability of marginalized groups to gain equal participation (p. 62), these groups have nevertheless been longstanding participants in the public sphere, finding ways, despite their circumstances, to organize and participate politically (p. 59, 61). Fraser addresses Habermas’ apparent undermining of these coexisting deliberative spheres by proposing the term “subaltern counterpublics.” Here, she identifies alternative or peripheral public spaces in which “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). For Fraser, counterpublics operate first by creating communities and allegiances of people with particular concerns and interests (internal), and then by addressing and challenging the discourses and practices of dominant groups (external) (p. 68). The goals and outcomes of subaltern counterpublics are not always democratic or positive, and they can have their own hierarchies and exclusionary practices (Tran, 2019, p. 291). However,

according to Fraser, they are politically productive in that "they help expand discursive space" by bringing otherwise dispersed concerns and preoccupations into a shared space of discussion and dissention—a tension that allows these groups to "[respond] to exclusions within dominant publics" (p. 67). At their best, therefore, subaltern counterpublics can incite change and progress within the broader public. For example, Fraser discusses how the first- and second-wave feminist movements introduced language about sexism and harassment that helped women to articulate some of their social and political realities for the first time, thus paving the way for broader social recognition and contestation of gender-based cultural issues. That these once-novel terms are now ubiquitous in western cultures illustrates how feminist and other counterpublics can "recast [people's] needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating, the extent of [their] disadvantage in official public spheres" (p. 67). Vrikki and Malik (2019) suggest that subaltern counterpublics garnered via podcasts may have particular "interruptive potentiality" (p. 275) because they allow those without extensive training or resources to produce programs, and open up a space for those on the cultural and social peripheries to contest discourses and representations they experience in their lives (p. 276). Thus, by creating spaces to gather and protest, subaltern counterpublics may be able to "partially … offset, although not wholly … eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies" (p. 68). Comprised of people with a common vision in tension with those of mainstream systems, subaltern counterpublics engage in "agitational" discursive processes to pursue, for better or worse, the systemic reconfiguring of social, cultural, and political systems (p. 68). As illustrated by the example of the feminist movement, these efforts can contribute to tangible, positive, and systemic (but never total or static) change.

Fraser's (1990) recognition that (counter)publics operate by garnering internal energy and a degree of cohesion around a particular ideal, identity, or cause finds resonance in scholarship about the social construction of communities and publics. Benedict Anderson's 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* famously theorized nationalistic sensibilities as historically and culturally situated. He located the rise of nationalism partially within the invention of the printing press after the 15th century and the emerging capitalistic appeal after the 18th century of disseminating texts in major languages (such as English and French) that wide audiences, rather than solely niche ones, could purchase and consume (Anderson, 2006, p. 44). These historical-literary developments increased the circulation of a few major languages at the expense of smaller ones, leading to "the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (p. 46). Importantly, Anderson understood the nation and nationalism as "cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (p. 4) in that, despite the impossibility of knowing or interacting with the majority of the members of one's nation, the nation construct can nevertheless instil a profound (if arbitrary) sense of unity and devotion between its members—regardless of the actual political or material conditions that help shape their lived experiences (p. 6-7). Hence Anderson's term "imagined communities," a concept that foregrounds the historical-cultural construction of nation(state)s in particular, but with clear significance to communities and publics of a smaller scale as well.

Michael Warner's (2002) chapter "Publics and Counterpublics" offers a discussion somewhat at the intersection of the work examined so far in this chapter, providing a framework for theorizing and unpacking the discursive construction of publics more generally. He offers an in-depth theorization of publics and counterpublics, identifying some of the distinctions and

overlaps between each. Whereas Fraser's work highlights both the internal cohesion and external political and discursive work of counterpublics, Warner's definition of publics hinges more centrally on the presence of texts (p. 50). He notes that the circulation of multiple, interconnected texts over time creates the "ongoing space of encounter for discourse" and a space of reflexivity that brings a public to life (p. 62). He contends that publics are "strange" in that they are often conceptualized in the West as agentive and active (p. 51) despite the fact that they are actually rooted in discourse; he says publics are "mediated by cultural forms" and that they "do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them" (p. 54). Therefore, the sense of duration and motion that we tend to confer on publics, he says, is an illusion (p. 68). At the same time, Warner comments that the Internet may be complicating his theorization of publics because "the absence of punctual rhythms may make it very difficult to connect localized acts of reading to the modes of agency that prevail within the social imaginary of modernity" (p. 69). In other words, the sense of incessancy within online discourse contrasts with the discursive discontinuities of offline publics, although Warner does not offer further discussion on this point.

Warner also contrasts his use of the term "publics" with the notions of other theorists, such as Habermas, who theorize "other ways of organizing strangers" (p. 56). For Warner, publics are participation-centred, whereas other groups (non-publics) tend to primarily operate around a common identity:

> Indeed, a public might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers—nations, religions, races, guilds, and so on—have manifest positive content. They select strangers by criteria of territory or identity or belief or some other test of membership. One can address strangers in such contexts because a common identity has been established through independent means or institutions (e.g., creeds, armies, parties). A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable. (p. 56)

Publics thus require some sort of "active uptake" or willful attentiveness (although Warner's definition of attention is flexible, and can account for forms of multitasking and other casual listening practices)—a characteristic that grants publics their apparent status as active, grassroots, and historically situated entities (p. 61). Publics therefore "commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated" (p. 61). Regarding Warner's contention that publics operate under a notion of "stranger-relationality," he clarifies that members' lack of familiarity does not detract from a public's ability to garner intimacy, and that strangeness in the modern context does necessarily mark participants as Other. He contends that, "[i]n the context of a public, … strangers can be treated as already belonging to our world. More: they *must* be. We are routinely oriented to them in common life. They are a normal feature of the social" (p. 56). He states, furthermore, that publics also possess common structures and frameworks, as "preexisting forms and channels of circulation" inevitably shape a public's practices and ability to function meaningfully as a group in the first place. These characteristics include "shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres)" (p. 75). Thus, while accessibility (for example, through shared language) is obviously important for publics to function, their needs go beyond this; their members may be (at least initially) strangers while still requiring some similar cultural, social, and linguistic frameworks for their work to be mutually intelligible and productive (p. 77).

Finally, Warner ends his chapter with a focus on counterpublics, which he says both align and diverge from publics in terms of quality and function. Counterpublics are distinct from publics in that they "[maintain] at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of [their]

subordinate status" against a public that is dominant politically, socially, linguistically, or otherwise (p. 86). A counterpublic discourse produces tension against a dominant discourse; as Warner notes, "it is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness" (p. 86). While counterpublics involve a level of stranger-relationality similar to regular publics, they also function with underlying assumptions about its members' interests, statuses, and/or beliefs:

> Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers. … But counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody. Addressees are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene. (p. 86)

Warner adds that "[a] hierarchy or stigma" marks the experiences of counterpublics' members; they may be stigmatized due to already-existing marginalized identities (such as race), by mere participation in a stigmatized community (such as feminism), or by some combination of these factors (p. 87). Thus, Warner ultimately conceptualizes counterpublics as historically and discursively situated groups that, comprised of people "marked by their participation in this kind of [stigmatized, subversive] discourse," embrace a counter-hegemonic position and project (p. 86). Key to these counterpublic projects is an effort to highlight the taken-for-granted sense of "universality or normalcy" that surrounds the dominant order's discourses and practices (p. 88). In other words, counterpublics function as discursive spaces that facilitate an "intimate life among publics of strangers," with a key impetus to make dominant discourses strange (p. 57).

While the term "public" is "a contested and messy term" interpreted differently in various academic settings (boyd, 2010, p. 40), Habermas, Fraser, Anderson, and Warner generally propose frameworks, often mutually reinforcing or constructive, that theorize the qualities and work of publics and counterpublics. Together, this work largely situates publics as discursive and

historical-cultural constructs that garner a sense of community and shared mission among members, with counterpublics operating in some degree of tension or conflict with dominant discourses and communities. As I discuss in the methodology section of this chapter, these theories inform my contention that *The Liturgists Podcast* community is constructed as a counterpublic against the dominant American evangelical culture out of which it is based. Next, though, I discuss scholarship that considers how publics can take shape within new media environments in particular, with affect and sound as their key elements.

Digital Communities: Networked, Affective, and Listening Publics

Many changes have marked the western media landscape since scholars like Habermas and Anderson theorized publics, with the most obvious being the development and ubiquity of the Internet. Over the past decade, studies of online communities have been rife in communication and media studies. A considerable area of recent interest surrounds how online environments facilitate "networked publics" (boyd, 2010, p. 39), in which people, who might have otherwise gathered together physically in homes or buildings, can connect with friends, colleagues, and strangers online (p. 39). Aligning with both Habermas' public sphere and Anderson's imagined communities, danah boyd (2010) explains that digital spaces and technological tools introduce possibilities for connection, collaboration, and the construction of "imagined collective[s]" (p. 39-40). boyd's approach to the concept of publics takes into account the tensions and continuities between these earlier theories, but she is specifically interested in how the Internet facilitates new and different forms of publics. She identifies, for example, four unique qualities of networked publics: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. These affordances illustrate, respectively, how our online interactions and posts happen publicly, remain visible,

and become archived; can be saved, screenshot, pasted, and forwarded quickly to other online locations; can be seen by a potential wide and dispersed audience, even without our awareness; and can be discovered relatively easily using search engines and other tools (p. 46).

Networked publics have several affordances, as well as some notable challenges, that are quite distinct from those of the traditionally conceptualized offline public sphere. In networked publics, "people can connect to one another across great distances and engage asynchronously produced content over extended periods," which can diminish some publics' traditional barriers to entry and participation (boyd, 2010, p. 53). Furthermore, Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo (2019) discuss how podcasts in particular help facilitate Habermas' and Fraser's ideals of public discussion and the pushing of discursive boundaries. However, they also mention the tensions present in podcasting, a medium that simultaneously provides spaces for public discussion while also being "startingly unpublic, solitary, and personalized" (p. 268). Individual podcasts, they note, may indeed reflect some of Habermas' public sphere qualities, but the podcasting terrain is busy; individual podcasts "exist in such a cacophonous, numerically expansive milieu as to put in doubt the very notion of a listening public" (p. 269). boyd (2010) also identifies several issues related to the increasing ubiquity of networked publics. First, online interactions take place within an "attention economy" in which attention is a limited resource and a commodity, with vast online content seemingly competing for their share of users' time and resources (p. 53). Second, there is no guarantee of the accuracy or authenticity of the content that people find online (p. 53-54). Third, while online spaces certainly increase the potential ease and scale of interactions, they are not inherently more democratic or accessible than traditional publics, as they "appear to reproduce many of the biases that exist in other publics," including racism and sexism (p. 54). Despite these important challenges, it is interesting to note how boyd's definition

of networked publics as “publics that are restructured by networked technologies” and “simultaneously a space and a collection of people” (p. 41) broadly aligns with the work of scholars such as Fraser (1990), with the added digital element.

Building on boyd’s (2010) groundwork, scholars have inserted affect into the discussion of networked publics, identifying how online communities are shaped by, and depend on, its members’ emotional experiences and allegiances (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 10). Jodi Dean (2010) argues that all social media platforms “produce and circulate affect as a binding technique” (p. 21) insofar as they evoke emotional and affective expressions that connect users in the network:

> Affective networks produce feelings of community or what we might call ‘community without community’. They enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other in ways we can never fully account for or predict. (p. 22)

The notion that affect circulates through online space to foster community and support networks aligns with the work highlighted in the literature review about podcasts’ community-building possibilities, as well as Anderson’s and boyd’s theories about how affective community allegiances can facilitate an intense sense of devotion to an imagined, constructed public. Papacharissi (2015) has also drawn on boyd’s work to consider how “affective publics” on Twitter use “expressions of sentiment” as impetus to connect and mobilize sparse groups of people online (p. 5). In particular, she notes how storytelling facilitates affective connections within digital communities, since it allows people to share and gain common insight about others’ experiences that they might not otherwise have such intimate or immediate access to (p. 15). According to Papacharissi, stories affectively “bind” people together in a way that may initially seem fleeting and insignificant, but that can eventually move publics materially, ideologically, and politically:

> Understanding social media as structures of feeling, as soft [structures] of storytelling, permits us to examine them as soft structures of meaning-making practices that may be revolutionary. Perhaps they constitute no more than an imparting of a sense of being there, a feel for the tone and the mood of the moment. Possibly, they help publics collaboratively reimagine a shared future. Overtime, and together with systemic and contextual factors, they may progressively lead to change. For the time being and in the moment, they are our means for feeling our way into worlds we cannot experience directly, and as such, they mean something. (p. 15)

For Papacharissi, affect is a crucial, if ephemeral, part of the capacity for networked publics to cultivate spaces of connection and understanding, possibly contributing to lasting individual, social, and political change.

Lünenborg (2019) also highlights the connection between affect and networked publics, noting that a focus on the relationship between collectives and emotions allows us to consider networks' "relational, processual, and performative character, thus being able to account for the complex mobile media environment constituting new networks of communication" (p. 319). Khoja-Moolji (2015) discusses the political dimensions of affective networks, but underscores how affective connections can legitimate and intensify a group's shared prejudices, leading to harmful ideologies and practices on the part of that community. Discussing the #BringBackOurGirls tweets from 2014 surrounding the kidnapping of hundreds of Nigerian girls, Khoja-Moolji discusses how these tweets, while intended to help, ultimately reinforce negative cultural associations by developing "affective intensities" that cause its members to "draw upon, and rearticulate, long-standing colonial and imperial conceptualizations about Islam, Muslims, and schoolgirls" (p. 349). This work highlights the potentially insidious ways that affect drives networked practices by appealing to a group's prejudices and harmful thinking, even when those views are hidden under a veneer of progress and sincere concern.

Earlier, I mentioned Sterne's (2003) discussion of the historical and cultural conditions that have led to the widely held assumption in the West of the superiority and objectivity of the

visual over the audible. Sterne eschews such binary thinking, arguing for the need to think more broadly about sound and the relationship between listening, feeling, and knowing (p. 18). Some scholars who study contemporary auditory media have taken Sterne's lead, theorizing how digital technologies can facilitate the creation of sound-based communities as well as discussing the significance of listening within new media landscapes and their associated spaces of political deliberation. These scholars have narrowed in on sound itself, and its corollary, listening, as key to the formation of social, political, and/or religious collectives, in part due to the spoken word's ability to evoke affective responses.

Lacey's (2011) article "Listening Overlooked: An Audit of Listening as a Category in the Public Sphere" focuses on listening within auditory spaces. She conceptualizes listening as a necessary and active part of the political realm in part because it engages people affectively and emotionally, allowing them to formulate what she calls "listening public[s]" (p. 9). In line with some of the research explored in the literature review about how sound encompasses its listeners, Lacey argues that acoustic environments are politically powerful because "sound surrounds" and is thus "grounded in experience," forming "a 'resonant sphere' with no centre and no margins" (p. 8). For Lacey, listening is an active, personal, and affective process, and thus "necessarily and inescapably political"—a notion that inspires new understandings of the role of listening and sound across social and political spheres (p. 6). Elsewhere, she also situates listening as an act of faith that hinges on a moment of activity in which a participant "listens out" in anticipation of hearing something that resonates personally or politically:

> Listening can therefore be understood as being in a state of anticipation, of listening *out* for something. A listening public in this sense is an always latent public – attentive, but not determined by what is being listened *to*. Any intervention in the public sphere is undertaken in the hope, faith, or expectation that there is a public out there, ready to listen and to engage. 'Listening out' is the necessary corollary of the indiscriminancy of public address. There is a faith in the moment of address that there is a public out there, and

> there is a faith in the act of listening that there will be some resonance with the address. (Lacey, 2011, p. 11)

Lacey's (2011) discussion of listening as faith is compelling for this project, which considers how religious podcasts construct community through an audio-based, and thus listening-dependent, medium. Lacey's work, in conjunction with the other theoretical background discussed so far in this chapter, provides a catalyst for considering how listening serves as an act of faith in both senses of the word: in the sense of "listening out" as Lacey discusses, and as a (sometimes desperate) act of literal faith for those navigating the tenets of their fundamentalist Christian backgrounds. For these scholars, listening can be an active and political process, allowing audiences to engage critically with the stories they hear and mobilizing them to act in their personal lives and communities. From this perspective, then, listening is a key part of the formation and operation of publics.

Crawford (2012) also studies how new technologies facilitate listening publics, which she conceptualizes as active, engaged spaces that continually require users' attention to the textual and auditory cues they send people's way. She notes how media convergence—the collapse of various technologies into a central platform or device—demands new forms of "network listening" as users live in constant anticipation of notifications and news, and desire to stay "in the loop" with friends, acquaintances, and celebrities (p. 218-219). Thus, new mobile technologies have influenced people's relationships to their physical and aural surroundings, with the iPhone in particular acting as "a significant agent in the remaking of place and of the act of listening to the sounds around us" (p. 226). In another article analyzing individual, political, and corporate uses of Twitter, Crawford (2009) argues for the importance of conceptualizing listening itself "as a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online" (p. 527), and as an activity that requires a high level of engagement and participation:

> A consideration of listening practices allows for a more acute assessment of online engagement, and decentres the current overemphasis on posting, commenting and 'speaking up' as the only significant forms of participation. Additionally, it allows for the deep sense of connection that listening participants can feel in online spaces, rather than diminishing this form of presence as lurking, with all its linguistic connotations of a sense of threat, ambiguity or concealment. (p. 528)

Crawford's notion of "listening" is broad, accounting for the significant proportion of new media participants who quietly consume media in the background (as "lurkers"). While this concept specifically addresses listening within the context of largely text-based (written) online spaces, it also has clear implications for listening practices within visual social media platforms (e.g. Instagram) and auditory media (e.g. podcasting). Crawford (2011) refers to listening as "the neglected form of participation" (p. 63) because few scholars have bothered to study the way listening (rather than talking) fosters emotional connection, and thus how it "can function as an agentic power itself" and "generate powerful bonds of social intimacy and connectedness" (p. 66). Crawford's (2011) work underscores the importance of conceptualizing listening, within a wide range of online spaces, as a meaningful practice unto itself, with unique affective and political implications that tend to get ignored in analyses of more readily observable, directly participatory forms of online engagement (p. 66-67). Both Dobson (2010) and Hendriks, Ercan, and Duus (2019) agree, noting that listening has been profoundly ignored in theorizations of the public sphere and political deliberation despite its centrality to the democratic process. Both groups note the oversight of acclaimed scholars such as Habermas to the role of listening in democratic states (Dobson, 2010, p. 765; Hendricks, Ercan, & Duus, 2019, p. 139).

So far, I have discussed some of the ways that collectives operate and form in digital spaces, and I have highlighted affect and emotion as forces that can help solidify the bond between group members, leading them to gather and act with political impact. Koivunen summarizes these points in stating that "encounters with different media engage senses and

affects (emotions, feelings, passions) and, hence, have effects. … Affects, in this sense, pose questions about the links between the subjective and the cultural, individual and social, self and other, inside and outside" (as cited in Paasonen, Hillis, & Petit, 2015, p. 3). I have also discussed the importance of studying listening, and listening publics, as practices and spaces with political and personal implications. With this context in mind, it is worthwhile touching on how the affective connections that digital networks facilitate have some historical precedent in traditional media. To illustrate this dynamic in relationship to this project's case study, I briefly turn to histories of religious radio broadcasting, arguing that these media practices serve as precursors to the religious communities that organize around contemporary digital media such as podcasts.

Remediation: Continuities between Religious Radio and Podcasting Communities

Given the capacity for media to evoke and circulate affect, and for communal bonds to be strengthened through this process, it is no surprise that religious publics in particular have historically exploited "old" and "new" media to solidify connections within their communities and to recruit members to them. Communication scholar Quentin Schultze (1987) draws attention to the history of religious broadcasting and religious groups' enthusiasm about the potential of new media to bring "spiritual and moral efficacy" to society (p. 256). As Schultze details, evangelical audiences have long placed their hope in the promises of the newest technological developments. These Christian communities "have been the major advocates of religious broadcasting and the most vocal supporters of the mythos of the electronic church" due to its anticipated potential to transcend barriers of space and time and to open up new possibilities for expanding the reach of their religion (p. 248). Schultze thus highlights the deep and relatively longstanding belief among Christians that God can use mass media to bring

salvation to the masses—even if the popularity of religious broadcasting has not necessarily translated to an actual increase in Christians or more peace in the world (p. 256).

Some Protestants were initially skeptical of mass media's non-Christian content and expressed concern that "the radio airwaves were the devil's own province with which good Christians should not tamper" (Hangen, 2002, p. 21). However, these concerns were eventually superseded by the pervasive belief, largely harboured by evangelicals, that God could and would use radio to accomplish his redemptive work and connect believers to a larger network (Hangen, 2002, p. 21; Schultze, 1987, p. 249; Schultze, 1988). Several scholars highlight the relationship between mass media and the development of religious imagined communities in the West. Echoing many of the technological and historical developments outlined by Schultze, Hangen's (2002) book *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America* highlights the close and mutually dependent relationship between developments in mass media and the growth and popularity of religious conservatism in the United States (p. 8). In particular, Hangen highlights radio's contribution to the cultivation and growth of American Christian communities in the 20th century. These developments had profound impacts on American political and cultural life more broadly, helping revitalize and then push into the mainstream a religious community (Christian fundamentalism) that once seemed destined to remain at the margins of American life (p. 157-158). As Hangen notes, "evangelical broadcasting helped its committed listeners envision a national community and helped increase visibility for the revitalist [*sic*] cause. Religious radio changed the evangelical movement's self-perception and strategic position in American life from marginalized outsider to ubiquitous cultural presence" (p. 157-158). The religious right's radio programs thus provided both personal respite and connection to other Christians while also serving as global proselytizing agents, helping concretize and popularize a

set of beliefs that eventually made it to the American mainstream. Similarly, Schulze (1988) discusses the significant (yet largely unacknowledged) role of pre-television religious radio programs in the U.S. in "creating a national evangelical identity, locating and promoting symbolic leaders, and legitimizing particular values and attitudes" (p. 302). Thus, for faith-filled hopefuls, religious radio in the United States largely affirmed their sense of wonder and awe about mass media, helping solidify their purpose and place in the larger Christian community.

The relationship between mass media and the work of religious communities is increasingly pressing as these groups continue to embrace new media, including digital tools, to connect with others around the world. As Kay (2009) notes in a discussion of global Pentecostal radio and television broadcasting trends and practices, more people are engaging with religious audiovisual content in lieu of attending formal church services (p. 245). Religious media bring the service directly to the home of "people who would otherwise never consider entering a church building" (p. 245). Thus, (new) media allow traditionally public religious services to enter into the private domestic realm, helping viewers "[establish] a quasi-personal relationship with the faith-embodying broadcaster" (p. 245). While Kay's discussion focuses on televangelism's role in introducing the church service into the American home, it also begins to gesture toward the trends and implications of the current media environment. In this environment, people are able to access and share content, religious or otherwise, from their personal technology devices both from within and beyond the home, allowing them to engage with global audiences from virtually limitless locations. Hangen (2002) also anticipates religious communities' faith in new digital media to continue the work that religious broadcasting started, noting that "[r]adio evangelism prefigured the ways in which other forms of mass media would be employed to cement an evangelical 'community' that would be, Protestant conservatives

hoped, less circumscribed by region, race, or class than physical communities across the United States" (p. 157). Schultze's (1987) contention that "[e]vangelicals projected American technological optimism onto their view of radio and later television" (p. 248) also provides a compelling point of departure for thinking about how religious groups might similarly embrace newer technological and digital developments, including podcasts, as faith- and community-building tools.

If, as Kay (2009) has shown, televangelism brought church into the home, I argue that podcasting offers a similarly rich case study of how, in the contemporary context, church can flow into and out of the manifold rhythms of people's personal and intimate lives through newer sound-based media technologies. Heise (2014) shows how podcasting in particular channels some of radio's strategies and aesthetics by borrowing its organizational formats, storytelling techniques, and general centrality of the voice, among other characteristics and practices (p. 3-4). Bolter and Grusin's (1999) work on remediation explains this phenomenon. They illustrate how a medium's affordances, technologies, and practices persist (are remediated) in subsequent media; essentially, "a medium refashions its predecessors" (p. 17) as it seeks to provide an experience that is (seemingly) increasingly immediate and live (p. 9). The history of religious radio broadcasting shows some precedent for religious groups' embrace of contemporary digital tools and practices. For example, just as newer technologies can facilitate affective bonds between people in networked publics, religious radio listeners' letters to their favourite evangelists illustrated the affective networking that took place in the (pre-Internet) radio era:

> Letters from listeners to religious preachers describe the complex feelings evoked: nostalgia for an American Christian past that may or may not have ever existed; fear for the future of the nation and for the state of one's soul before God; longing for inclusion and meaning in an American present ever threatening, disorienting, and full of trouble; gratitude for a shared language of religious experience; and pride in a thriving

> evangelical Protestant subculture with access to the powerful channels of American media. (Hangen, 2002, p. 19)

Despite this history of religious radio, and the way new sound-based technologies remediate older media's aesthetics and strategies to engage contemporary religious audiences, studies into the affective and political impact, as well as the participatory potential, of these newer auditory technologies have remained "conceptually fragmented" and largely unpopular within media studies (Sterne, 2003, p. 4). This project seeks to address this research gap by studying a religious podcast's constructions of community.

In this chapter thus far, I have discussed various communication and media theories on publics and counterpublics, and I have argued for the necessity of conceptualizing listening as a meaningful and important element of (counter)public practices, particularly when analyzing auditory media texts. I have also connected the histories and practices of religious radio broadcasting to those of contemporary religious podcasting communities. These histories take on added significance when using Lacey's (2011) lens of faithful listening to connect podcast audiences' "listening out" practices with those of religious radio listeners who, in the decades prior to podcasting's existence, similarly awaited the message of the comforting radio voice. Together, these theories and histories provide ample groundwork for studying how a popular post-evangelical podcast, *The Liturgists Podcast*, constructs its sense of community through its production and formatting choices and in the discourses it constructs. Before moving on to my case study, however, it is first necessary to discuss this project's methodologies.

Methodology

This project's case study is *The Liturgists Podcast* (*TLP*), a podcast marketed as a progressive safe space primarily for people questioning or distancing from their evangelical Christian faith.

TLP as a podcasting community provides an important opportunity for studying the relationship between progressive religious communities and podcasting because it is, to my knowledge, the largest post- and ex-evangelical podcasting/online community. The group also situates itself, explicitly and implicitly, as somewhat counter to and critical of the larger American evangelical culture out of which its hosts and many of its listeners are based. The podcast also includes many prominent figures from the larger progressive Christian scene in its episodes, thus serving as a hub for a wide array of people navigating similar religious terrain. The project's primary research question is: How do Christian communities use podcasting in support of their progressive ethos and to construct a shared sense of community among its listeners? Two additional questions also inform my analysis:

1. How do *TLP*'s production and formatting choices nurture a shared sense of community among its dispersed listeners?
2. What discursive themes arise throughout *TLP*'s episodes, and how do they contribute to the podcast's construction of a post-Christian community?

These questions require analysis of the podcast's formatting and editorial qualities and strategies as well as analysis of the formal discourses that the podcast draws on and constructs.

TLP had published 101 podcast episodes when I began data collection in the summer of 2019. Starting with the first published episode, I selected and transcribed every second one, for a total dataset of 50 *TLP* episodes which were published between July 2014 and May 2019. On average, the selected episodes are approximately 60 to 70 minutes in length, with the shortest being 15 minutes and the longest being two hours and fifteen minutes. I transcribed most of the 50 episodes verbatim and in their entirety, largely to assist my memory recall later in my research process. I paraphrased parts of episodes if they were repetitive or significantly long and

without meaningful quotes related to this project's research questions. I also made detailed notes of any editorial/aesthetic elements present in the episodes (e.g. music and commercials). My transcription of the 50 episodes yielded an initial dataset of approximately 500 pages. I carefully read through this document, and in a second document of 159 pages I made point form notes about each episode (e.g. "Hillary interviews Amelie, Science Mike's daughter, about masculinity") with additional descriptive notes and quotations relevant to my research questions. I also made brief note of the episodes' editorial elements (e.g. "random voices" or "Patreon commercial break"). I then read through the second document and, in a third and final document of 68 pages, I summarized the episodes, noted key themes (e.g. "politics") and practices (e.g. "meditation"), and included significant quotations. This three-stage process familiarized me with my dataset and allowed me to identify key themes and content (e.g. quotations) related to my research questions. While the majority of the 50 episodes made it into my analysis, six episodes showed little relevance to my research questions and were ultimately excluded[9]. All episode numbers and titles are included in the References section at the end of this document[10].

As with most podcasts, a wide range of additional materials (paratexts) extend beyond *TLP*'s podcast itself. For example, *TLP*'s website, theliturgists.com, provides extensive textual and visual content, including information on the values, goals, beliefs, and history of the community. An earlier version of the website's main page also featured a loop of several soundless videos with nature and religious scenes, which set the affective and contemplative tone that *TLP* seems to pursue throughout its online and podcasting marketing (this video was

[9] Episodes 5, 7, 11, 15, 65, and 77 were excluded from my analysis.
[10] APA in-text citation guidelines for podcasts ask for reference to the producer's name and the year of publication. Due to the size of my dataset and a significant number of citations, I have chosen to forego this citational convention in order to add clarity to my writing. Instead, I make reference to the number of the podcast in which I retrieved the information (e.g. Episode 3), which I integrate as normal into my document.

removed in winter 2020). The hosts of *TLP* are also active on the official *The Liturgists* Facebook (26,000 likes), Twitter (30,000 followers), and Instagram pages (30,000 followers). *TLP* listeners and fans have also created unofficial online communities, such as the Facebook LitCom group with over 9,000 members, where they discuss topics and issues related to those explored in the podcast. While each of these online spaces, both producer- and fan-led, would provide rich case studies in their own right, I have limited my formal analysis to the content that I collected from the podcast episodes. Of course, it is not always possible to discern "where the boundaries of the cultural resources start and end" (Morris, Hansen, & Hoyt, 2019, p. 16), and there is no doubt some overlap of content on the podcast and on *TLP*'s official social media pages, for example. However, due to this project's time and space constraints, and out of a desire to focus my study exclusively on podcasts as community-building tools, I have excluded these paratexts from my formal analysis. Therefore, while I collected screen shots and videos of all pages of theliturgists.com during my data collection stage to prepare for the possibility of expanding my study and in anticipation of the content getting deleted or altered[11], I will not include these texts as part of my analysis.

I approach this research with the assumption that a study's theoretical and methodological frameworks inform each other, and "that one's theoretical lens ought to guide the research methods" (Kovach, 2005, p. 29). Therefore, I draw on both literature and theoretical work from Chapter Two and Chapter Three as well as the methodological framework of discourse analysis (discussed below) to inform my analysis. The analysis is divided into two major parts. In the first section, I analyze *TLP*'s production and formatting characteristics and

[11] Scholars have identified several difficulties related to researching and collecting podcasts within academic settings, including determining which paratexts to preserve as well as contending with the ephemeral, changing nature of podcasts and the technologies that support them (Morris, Hansen, & Hoyt, 2019, p. 16-17; Wrather, 2019, p. 144).

strategies, and discuss how these qualities contribute to the development of a shared sense of post-Christian community for its listeners. To inform and refine this part of my analysis, I draw on literature that discusses podcasting's technological and aesthetic qualities, and that theorizes the continuities between religious online publics and religious radio publics. In the second section of the analysis, I focus on *TLP*'s discourses, identifying themes that the hosts develop and discussing how these discourses contribute to the construction of progressive Christian community. I demonstrate how *TLP* constructs its post-evangelical sensibility by situating its progressive discourses *in opposition* to those of the American evangelical mainstream. *TLP* often alludes to these evangelical discourses and practices in its episodes, and I also identify them through reference to popular articles and by reflecting on my personal experience in evangelicalism. The decision to separate my analysis into these two sections (production and discourses) is somewhat arbitrary, as both elements operate in tandem throughout *TLP*'s episodes. While these methodological decisions have implicated me in "the constructive effects of discourse" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 2), I have chosen to make them because analyzing these specific elements in turn provides some order to a complex project and allows me to articulate and justify precise parts of my argument with more clarity.

Given the emphasis of this second analytical section on progressive Christian discourses present in *TLP*, I require a formal methodological framework to guide my analysis. This section thus draws on discourse analysis, a method that scholars use to study how texts (in the broad sense) integrate and engage multiple discourses that together "produce a social reality that we experience as solid and real" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 1-2). Discourse analysis is based in the social constructionist tradition of thought of which French scholar Michel Foucault was a significant part. In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) discusses how

medical discourses, such as madness, sickness, and sexuality, arose and evolved in 18th-century Europe. He said these discourses contributed to taken-for-granted cultural assumptions about particular people and bodies based on “highly dispersed” discourses and associations (p. 44), rather than on connections that are actually “present in the object” (p. 45). For Foucault, all discourses are arbitrary in that they do not reflect some sort of intrinsic or extrinsic reality; rather, they establish the frameworks and language through which a society perceives, conceptualizes, and organizes reality (p. 46). Elsewhere, Foucault (1979) details, through his concept of “power-knowledge,” the notion that “power produces knowledge” (p. 27). This concept acknowledges that all forms of knowledge are involved in power struggles which eventually shape what forms of knowledge garner attention and gain truth status, and what knowledge and bodies become relegated to the margins of a society’s discourses, interests, and understanding. Power, in this sense, is “both a productive and constraining force” because it produces knowledge that allows people to move meaningfully through their social worlds while simultaneously constricting that movement by “preclud[ing] alternative possibilities” of understanding and experiencing the world (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 15, 37). Thus, power and knowledge are mutually reinforcing; power legitimizes particular forms of knowledge while knowledge reinforces power relations (Foucault, 1979, p. 27; Mills, 2003, p. 67).

Foucault’s notion of discourse lays groundwork for articulating and understanding how knowledge becomes produced in particular cultures and socio-historical moments—that is, how knowledge is socially constructed, and thus strange and not inevitable. Inspired by Foucault’s work, scholars have used discourse analysis in their qualitative research to study how discourses produce certain kinds of knowledge and make them intelligible:

> Discourse analysis … tries to explore how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held

> in place over time. Whereas other qualitative methodologies work to understand or interpret social reality as it exists, discourse analysis endeavors to uncover the way in which it is produced. This is the most important contribution of discourse analysis: It examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals it. In other words, discourse analysis views discourse as constitutive of the social world—not a route to it—and assumes that the world cannot be known separately from discourse. (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 6)

Whereas western cultures tend to assume that their social worlds and identities operate according to a fixed and inevitable order, discourse analysts view these elements as necessarily dynamic and contingent. Discourse analysis therefore seeks to explicate "*how* we create this reality so that it appears objective and natural" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 33). Under these assumptions and drawing on Foucault's work, Kendall and Wickham (1999) establish five points to consider when studying discourses. First, discourse analysts should recognize that discourse production hinges on sets of interrelated, systemic statements that formulate seemingly intelligible, coherent, and taken-for-granted categories and systems of knowledge (p. 42). Then, discourse analysts should consider how specific discourses arise and in what social and historical contexts; how discourses "delimit the sayable," that is, make possible certain ways of articulating and imagining the world while repudiating others or rendering them unintelligible; how discourses can (and do) at any time "invent new categories" for conceptualizing people and the world; and that discourses are deeply political in that knowledge extends beyond the realm of the intangible (language) to impact people's material realities (p. 44-45). Together, these steps direct researchers to focus on the production of discourses and their sociocultural contexts, the way discourses give rise to new ways of conceptualizing the world, and the interrelations between discourse and materiality. The objective of discourse analysis is not to "[write] a history of the referent" (Foucault, 1972, p. 47), or to conjure up some history about how things "really" are (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 21, 33). Rather, discourse analysis aims to denaturalize discourse,

or “to make it emerge in its own complexity” by interrogating its constructed nature and examining its consequences (Foucault, 1972, p. 47).

I use discourse analysis as the primary method in the second analytical section in order to identify *TLP*’s major discourses and how they both challenge mainstream evangelical discourses in the United States and contribute to the podcast’s construction of progressive religious community. Discourse analysis is a suitable method for a study on Christian (counter)publics because, as Warner (2002) argues, publics exist and operate through the circulation of texts, and these texts reinforce wider discourses and strengthen a community’s sense of connection and purpose (p. 62). Therefore, discourse analysis provides a formal framework for explicating some of the major discursive lenses operating within *TLP*’s primary texts (the podcast episodes).

Before moving to the analysis, I would like to respond to Pillow’s (2003) call for reflexivity in qualitative research by reflecting on this project’s ethical considerations and my own position in relation to *The Liturgists* community. This thesis has not required formal ethics clearance during any part of the research process. However, as a former Christian with a personal history in the evangelical tradition and ongoing loose connections to both fundamentalist and progressive Christian communities, I must acknowledge that I occupy a complicated and personal position relative to *TLP* and the western evangelical cultures and practices to which they respond. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, during my teen and early adult years I was heavily involved in my local evangelical church, and adopted many of their conservative and traditional religious, political, and social views throughout that time. In my early 20s I decided to leave the church altogether due to the complex mixture of personal and political incompatibilities I felt with my particular denomination as well as my growing disinterest in using the Bible, or any other primarily religious lens, to inform my worldviews, beliefs, and

practices. While my position remains the same today, I have nevertheless continued to follow and value the work of some authors and public figures in the progressive Christian community. A major impetus to get involved in my church during my youth was its apparent interest in helping others and making a positive impact in the lives of local people and around the world. Eventually, though, progressive Christian thinkers prompted me to re-evaluate both my and the evangelical church's complicity in injustice and intolerance, and to critique its problematic practices and motivations (such as participating in mission trips, which involve going to typically "foreign" and poorer countries to tell people about Jesus). I have continued to engage with the work of some of those Christian figures to this day. While many of these authors and speakers have transitioned away from the conservative traditions in which they were raised, they continue to be advocates for social justice, compassion, and equality, urging Christians to learn about, and begin to dismantle, the systems of oppression from which their religious institutions have long profited. These leaders have done much to help me process my personal religious baggage and to help reconcile the disparity I often see between the church's theology ("love thy neighbour") and some of its practices and impacts. They have shown me, too, that the vision my younger self held of a church that welcomes, accepts, and loves the marginalized comes to fruition in religious communities across North America.

So while I no longer identify as Christian, and increasingly find discussing the tenets of different theological frameworks to be rather banal, I continue to read and learn about evangelical culture and debates due to my personal history in the church and out of deep concern about its exclusionary and harmful practices. Of course, these discussions are not limited to church buildings and committed churchgoers. The close marriage between evangelicalism and right-wing politics, especially in the United States, imbues these issues with continued relevance

as ongoing discussions about topics such as abortion and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) rights take place under the watchful eye of socially conservative politicians with evangelical backing whose policies often oppose and oppress people who diverge from the white heteropatriarchal mould. Still, I acknowledge that my relationship to organized Christianity is complicated: I regret and oppose some Christian theologies and practices even as I recognize that others continue to make necessary strides toward restoration.

These tensions came to the fore during the data collection phase of this project, during which I found that *TLP*'s podcast episodes transported me, sometimes abruptly, to surprising, unexpected, and formerly forgotten places of my past. Some episodes certainly impacted me affectively, evoking feelings like inspiration, sadness, and anger that occasionally registered in my body through tears or goosebumps on my skin. In McHugh's (2012) words, I very much experienced the research process "through the prism of [my] own lived experiences" (p. 195). Certainly, I must be cognizant of my personal stakes and biases in this project and how my experience necessarily informs my interpretation and evaluation of the texts. At the same time, my interest in this area of research stems directly from my history with evangelicalism, and this familiarity and experience serve as rationale for my decision to embark on such a project. We learn early in graduate studies that no text is neutral or objective, and I offer no such façade here: my experience in evangelicalism has inevitably shaped all parts of this project from conception to completion. What I do hope this project achieves, though—and what I think is required of all scholarship—is the casting of a persistently critical eye onto, in this case, the practices, discourses, and implications of a religious community with significant following and influence.

Chapter Four: Analysis

In this chapter, I examine *The Liturgists Podcast* episodes to understand how the community uses podcasting to construct a post-Christian listening public with particular progressive religious, political, and social preoccupations and objectives. To do so, I analyze two elements of the podcast. In the first section, I consider how *TLP* (a) makes use of podcasting's creative production and formatting affordances and (b) invokes and reimagines evangelical narrative traditions. I argue that these elements allow *TLP* to curate a structured listening experience that appeals to the presumed religious sensibilities and frameworks of its post-evangelical audience, reinforcing a shared listening public among dispersed members. In the second section, I examine *TLP*'s major religious, political, and social discourses, which contribute, I argue, to *TLP*'s construction of a progressive Christian community that rejects the discourses of the American evangelical mainstream. Through analysis of these two elements of *The Liturgists Podcast*, this chapter contends that the community participates in the counterpublic project that Fraser (1990) articulates: creating communities and allegiances of people with similar concerns, and addressing and challenging the discourses and practices of dominant groups (p. 68).

Part A: Constructing a Listening Public

In this section, I demonstrate how *TLP* makes use of podcasting's creative production and formatting affordances to imbue the hosts with authority (by highlighting their social capital and personal accomplishments) and to foster a sense of authentic, grassroots community. Using these strategies, the hosts construct themselves and the community as authoritative, caring, and authentic, helping bring together its dispersed post-evangelical listeners under their care. Next, I show how *TLP* draws on some of the rhetorical, textual, and affective narrative frameworks

common in traditional Christian communities—particularly, testimony, speaking in tongues, contemplative reading, and introspection. I highlight *TLP*'s use of these narrative traditions to invoke the affective and nostalgic sensibilities of its audience and to reimagine these practices in service of the community's progressive ethos, ultimately appealing to listeners' commonality and building a sense of solidarity. Through these two elements, *TLP* fashions an affective listening experience that resonates with the religious sensibilities and frameworks of its post-evangelical listeners, reinforcing its religious, discursive, and community project. In doing so, *TLP* aligns with Fraser's (1990) definition of a counterpublic: private spaces that strengthen the affective and community bonds between members in service of a shared listening public (p. 68).

Production and Formatting Strategies

Constructing Authority: Highlighting the Hosts' Social Capital and Personal Accomplishments

Free from government regulation, podcasting has relatively minor barriers to entry, participation, and production. As such, it facilitates creative and flexible production choices that allow podcasters to "imagine creative ways of presenting reality through sound" (Salvati, 2015, p. 234) and to craft a program that appeals to the specific "cultural competencies," interests, and goals of both the audience and hosts (Florini, 2015, p. 213). *TLP* makes use of podcasting's style, content, and production affordances to centre the creative and professional work, projects, thoughts, and personal developments of a range of well-known and accomplished figures. Doing so ultimately imbues the hosts and podcast with authority as it underscores the social connections and personal/professional achievements (and by extension, the experience, insight, and wisdom) of the hosts, guests, and community as a whole.

TLP constructs authority most readily by highlighting the social status, social connections, and creative personal work of the hosts in particular. Four main hosts are involved in the production and execution of *The Liturgists Podcast*. Michael Gungor and Mike ("Science Mike") McHargue created *TLP* in 2014 and were the major contributors to most of the episodes in my dataset. Dr. Hillary McBride and William Matthews became official hosts during the podcast's 68th episode in February 2018 and took an increasingly central role in the latter half of my dataset, although they had intermittently served as guest hosts in the first half as well. The brief biographies of the four hosts are as follows:

A. **Michael Gungor**: Executive producer and co-founder of *TLP*. Lead musician in the band Gungor. Author of *This: Becoming Free* (2019) and host of the podcast *Loving THIS*. American living in Los Angeles, California. White/Puerto Rican man. Identifies as a religious mystic.

B. **Mike ("Science Mike") McHargue**: Co-founder of *TLP*. Amateur science enthusiast. Host of the *Ask Science Mike* podcast. Author of *Finding God in the Waves: How I Lost My Faith and Found it Again through Science* (2016) and *You're a Miracle (and a Pain in the Ass)* (2020). Announced in October 2019 his indefinite sabbatical from *TLP* due to health reasons[12]. American living in Los Angeles, California. White man. Christian.

C. **Dr. Hillary McBride**: PhD (2020) in Counselling Psychology. Clinical counsellor. Author of *Mothers, Daughters & Body Image: Learning to Love Ourselves as We Are* (2017). Canadian living in Vancouver, British Columbia. White woman. Christian.

D. **William Matthews**: Independent musician and social justice advocate. American living in Los Angeles, California. Black man. Gay. Christian.

[12] https://twitter.com/TheLiturgists/status/1185283579376476160/photo/1

As the predominant contributors to the program, the four hosts occupy a unique position in the community to speak into the lives of their listeners as they choose, lead, and guide discussions. As the above biographies indicate, all of the hosts have achieved personal and professional accomplishments garnering significant attention in religious and popular cultures. Michael's reputation is particularly noteworthy given his history as a popular Christian musician. As I detailed in the introductory chapter, Michael and his band were once prolific in the Christian music scene, creating a Grammy-nominated album and leading worship services across the United States from 2010 until 2014. His decision to produce a post-evangelical podcast after his and his band's falling-out with evangelicalism in 2014 proved to secure the quick support and affection of people whose personal experiences resonated with those of the beloved-turned-outcast religious band. The allure of Michael's Christian rock star reputation along with his relatively well-known history as an evangelical exile may be partly responsible for *TLP*'s considerable uptake in listenership over a short period, especially considering his position as the podcast's executive producer and original co-host. The hosts highlight the podcast's popularity in Episode 9 (November 2014), noting that the podcast has an audience of approximately 50,000 listeners. In Episode 31 (February 2016), they say it has grown to reach "a few hundred thousand people," a statement they repeat in Episode 39 and Episode 59. Current podcast research also seems to lend weight to the possible relationship between hosts' social connections and reputations on the one hand and podcasts' appeal and ultimate success on the other: Cwynar (2019) argues that success in the podcasting world tends to have more to do with one's social connections than one's work ethic (p. 330). Situating these relatively well-known figures as *TLP*'s main voices therefore serves to imbue the program with prestige and authority from the

beginning as listeners can have faith that the hosts' knowledge, experiences, and social connections will inform a rich and valuable listening experience.

TLP regularly highlights the work and voices of the main hosts, often providing examples of their newest creative or professional projects (including sharing pieces of musical or written work with listeners) or discussing their personal life lessons. For example, in Episode 39 Michael interviews Science Mike about his book, *Finding God in the Waves*, in which he details his transition from evangelicalism to atheism to a more progressive Christian faith. In Episode 71, Hillary recites her poem—an extensive letter of apology, love, and gratitude to her body—which begins with the words, "Dear body, I'm sorry, and I love you. Dear body, I'm sorry for telling so many lies about you." She concludes by telling her body that "[y]ou are a mystery to me, and instead of frustration, now I feel full of wonder and appreciation because I love you, just as you are." In Episode 97, Science Mike and Hillary ask each other questions about their recent life lessons, with a focus on practices of personal growth and healing from trauma. In several cases, Michael and Science Mike's wives also take a role in discussions, often alongside the men. These episodes also highlight the hosts' creative work or personal perspectives on religious issues, underscoring their accomplishments, experience, and expertise. Episodes 41, 43, and 45 are three parts of a five-episode series that highlights the creative process behind Gungor's album *One Wild Life: Body*. These episodes feature Michael and Lisa Gungor discussing some of their recently released musical albums, including explaining the music-writing process, diving into some of the lyrical narratives, and sharing (recorded) songs with listeners. The Gungors similarly discuss their other recent albums, *One Wild Life: Soul* and *One Wild Life: Spirit*, in Episode 21 and Episode 33, respectively.

Podcasting facilitates commercial strategies that might not be permitted in strictly regulated commercial contexts (Cwynar, 2019, p. 319). *TLP* takes advantage of this content and formatting flexibility (Berry, 2016b, p. 9) to craft and insert advertisements in support of the hosts' projects and initiatives, including podcasts, books, music albums, and professional services. Most notably, each episode commences with a standardized, pre-recorded advertisement, spoken by one of the hosts, aimed at garnering social and financial support for *TLP*-specific initiatives. While outside of the timeframe for my study, a recent introduction (from May 2020) illustrates how the hosts engage in advertorial activities for the podcast itself. In this sound clip, Michael discusses a *TLP* initiative to help listeners connect during the global COVID-19 pandemic. He invites listeners to download meditative podcasts that are normally offered exclusively to the podcast's Patreon contributors, a platform that content creators use to raise financial support, for which they can offer exclusive content (incentives) in return.

> Hi, everyone. Michael here. Right now, we are all experiencing an unprecedented set of events in our lifetime, and the stress of the situation and the loneliness of our social distancing can be overwhelming for a lot of us at times. *The Liturgists* want to do what we can to help at this time. We have a few ways we want to provide connection and relief. One thing is we get together every Sunday at 11:00 A.M. Pacific for The Sunday Thing. It's a wonderful time where we can see each other's faces and break out into smaller groups to find real connection with each other. Virtual conversations are sort of perfect for this time, and The Sunday Thing offers an easy way for you to connect with others every single week. We are also opening up our paid meditations on our website that we normally just offer our patrons [Patreon supporters], but we just want you to be able to access what you need for your own spiritual and emotional and mental wellbeing right now, and meditation can be such a powerful tool for finding peace in the storm. So we have a set available on the website and we'll be releasing new ones as we roll them out to our patrons while we all work to figure out our new normal here. So to find out more about all this, to get more involved with the community, *The Liturgists* community, just go to theliturgsists.com/together, that is theliturgists.com/together, and I hope to see you this week.

Here, Michael mentions that the hosts are offering listeners free access to content that is normally subscription-based out of concern for their "spiritual and emotional and mental

wellbeing" given the loneliness and stress of the pandemic. He also directs listeners to *The Liturgists*' website to access material that, while currently free, may pique enough interest to motivate listeners to become financial contributors of the podcast. In doing so, Michael implicates himself simultaneously in "a moment of solidarity with listeners that blends into the narrative *and* the entrepreneurial drag of underfunded creative production" (Murray, 2019, p. 307). Michael frames the initiative as a project of goodwill and concern, conveniently masking its status as an advertisement promoting one of his personal projects, the podcast (since he is the producer, and therefore main financial beneficiary, of *TLP*). This use of the podcast serves to underscore the hosts' creative work, experience, reputations, and sincere concern for the community more generally, further cementing their authority to speak on personal, religious, and cultural matters on behalf of *TLP*.

The hosts insert similar *TLP*-related advertisements and endorsements throughout the episodes. For example, Episodes 53, 61, 67, and 91 are entirely dedicated to playing whole episodes of exclusive Patreon podcast episodes. Here, the hosts offer "sneak peeks" of content that is normally reserved for financial supporters, presumably with some hope of capturing listeners' attention and ultimately garnering financial support. Additionally, partway through Episode 37 on the Enneagram, Michael's (pre- or post-recorded) voice interrupts the program to promote an in-person, "two-day liturgical experience" of connection and meditation with Michael, Science Mike, and *TLP* fans, tickets for which listeners can purchase online. All of *TLP*'s episodes also end with a formal conclusion and *TLP*-related endorsement vocalized by one of the hosts. Unlike the introductory clips, the concluding advertisements are not standardized and are more variable, often reiterating points from the preceding discussion and highlighting upcoming initiatives or episodes. Michael and Science Mike complete Episode 37

by offering some final thoughts about the discussion as well as promoting the book and podcast of the authors featured in the episode. They also thank their staff and production team and ask their Patreon supporters to make requests online for future episode topics.

TLP also employs advertisements to promote the hosts' other personal work and upcoming projects. For example, directly following the introduction at the beginning of Episode 93, Michael announces the launch of his new podcast, *Loving THIS*, which he notes was released around the same time as his book, *THIS: Becoming Free*. These announcements, all taking place within the first few minutes of the ninety-minute episode, offer compound endorsements of various pieces of this host's work. Episode 39 also includes subtler endorsements as Science Mike casually mentions his personal podcast, *Ask Science Mike*, four times throughout the episode, which is the same episode dedicated to discussing his book, *Finding God in the Waves*. Finally, each *TLP* episode also informally showcases Michael's musical talents by integrating melodies and sound effects that he personally (co-)created. Foregrounding his musical snippets compounds the more formal endorsement of his work that takes place in episodes where he highlights his albums (commercial creative projects sold on major music streaming platforms, including Apple Music and Spotify).

In many cases, then, *TLP* integrates both explicit and indirect endorsements seamlessly with other podcast-related advertisements, announcements, and general material, blurring distinctions between the podcast's "regular" (often educational, uplifting, and inspiring) content and content that is more directly financially motivated. In contrast to many cultural industries, which tend to depend on more formal advertising practices and bureaucratic processes "involving large budget, top-down directives and institutional hurdles," podcasting facilitates a more "independent[t] and do-it-yourself approach" for producers (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 284).

Podcasting thus introduces new possibilities for people with little technical training and resources, as it “frees programs from the institutional and regulatory structures that limit what can be done” (Cwynar, 2019, p. 319). *TLP*’s hosts embrace these affordances to take control over their advertising decisions and placement, crafting promotional messages that reinforce their experiences, accomplishments, and authority and integrating them into the program as they wish.

TLP similarly highlights the perspectives, personal achievements, and professional work and expertise of accomplished religious and popular figures. Some of these figures are the hosts’ family members. In Episode 79, Michael, Science Mike, and Hillary interview Lisa Gungor about her book, *The Most Beautiful Thing I’ve Seen: Opening Your Eyes to Wonder*, in which she discusses some of the personal defining experiences of her life. Some of these experiences include her transition out of Christian fundamentalism and the birth of her and Michael’s daughter, Lucie, who has Down syndrome. Part of Episode 89 also features Lisa’s work, as she recites a long poem, included in her book, that she wrote to her daughter about the goodness of girls’ and women’s bodies. In Episode 85, Michael and Science Mike interview their wives, Lisa and Jenny, as part of *TLP*’s four-episode series on Christianity. They inquire about the women’s current Christian beliefs and discuss some of the beauty and problems they observe in mainstream Christianity. Lisa is also occasionally invited to participate as a co-host, as in Episode 1 where she joins Michael and Science Mike to discuss the science, art, and ontology of creativity. Lisa actively partakes in this discussion, offering insight and knowledge about her personal musical process. On the other hand, Episode 49 offers a full replay of an episode from *The Brilliance* podcast, hosted by Michael’s brother, David Gungor. Episode 17 also features David, who discusses his understanding of the Christian phenomenon of worship music. Michael

accompanies him, and they share their experiences navigating and participating in a religious practice that is often used to instill fear and control.

TLP also features a range of accomplished popular figures, often indirectly or directly highlighting their work in the process. In Episode 13, comedian and podcast host Pete Holmes discusses the process and science of humour with Michael and Science Mike. In Episode 37, the hosts interview Suzanne Stabile and Ian Cron, authors of the popular book *The Road Back to You* on The Enneagram, a nine-pronged personality typology system and the topic of this episode. Christena Cleveland, a professor, theologian, and activist, and Micky ScottBey Jones, an activist, doula, and public intellectual, discuss advocacy in Episode 55. Teresa Pasquale Mateus, a trauma therapist and author of *Scared Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*, contributes to *TLP*'s Episode 57 on spiritual trauma. Some of these guests, on the other hand, have particularly high reputation among progressive Christians. Dr. Peter Enns, who contributes to Episode 3 about the Bible, is an accomplished theologian and author, having written extensively about current theological debates and issues from a progressive standpoint. Episode 51 features popular Christian musician Ginny Owens who discusses her experience as a blind musician, and Sharon Salzburg, a Buddhist meditator and author of meditation books, discusses some of the tenets and practices of Buddhism in Episode 93. Richard Rohr, a self-described mystic, Catholic friar, and prolific author of progressive religious books, contributes substantially to Episode 35 and Episode 95, where he lays out his non-dual and mystical views of God and religion. Finally, in Episode 19, Episode 23, and Episode 83, the hosts invite the popular late progressive Christian speaker, advocate, and author Rachel Held Evans to discuss the release of her 2015 book *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, as well as to offer her perspective on abortion and other Christian hot-topics.

One of the affordances of podcasting is the possibility of giving a public microphone to "do-it-yourself … historymakers" and cultural commentators whose non-expert experiences and perspectives may nevertheless, within the space of the podcast, gain authority on par with that of the expert (Salvati, 2015, p. 232). The blurring of the expert and the non-expert is a common occurrence in *TLP* as the hosts (usually non-experts) offer their personal opinions on a wide array of topics. For example, while Michael may be regarded as a formal expert on matters of musical production and performance, he also shares his (seemingly informed) opinions on a host of other topics. As Episode 93 illustrates, Michael is considered the podcast's authority on Buddhism in particular, given his interest and experience in the religious tradition. Science Mike, on the other hand, openly discloses that he does not have formal scientific training or post-secondary education, yet he has gained a reputation as the podcast's science expert. The hosts also regularly converse casually with experts in various fields, asking questions and providing opinions in a way that is read as highly adept alongside a person of genuine formal expertise. On the other hand, Hillary makes frequent use of her therapeutic expertise on issues related to trauma, religion, and politics. However, her contributions often exist alongside those of her (non-expert) co-hosts and guests, contributing to a continual blur of expert/non-expert voices. Similar dynamics occur in shows such as Episode 3 with Peter Enns when Michael and Science Mike interact casually with the theologian's thoughts and insights.

Featuring and highlighting a range of accomplished figures and their work, and situating the expert and non-expert as equally knowledgable participants, imbues both hosts and guests with familiarity and authority within the space of *The Liturgists* community. Doing so contributes, I argue, to a host-listener hierarchy that is crucial for developing the shared intellectual frameworks and social dynamics that constitute *TLP*'s post-evangelical listening

public. *TLP*'s hosts in particular offer a continual, comforting presence across the episodes as they guide listeners with their trustworthy, authoritative voices through topics, questions, and debates related to Christianity and the contemporary cultural climate. By serving as "cultural interpreter[s] for a broad listenership," the hosts ultimately occupy a mystical position within *The Liturgists* community. This position is reminiscent of formal pastoral figures who encourage their churches and guide attendees' thinking by sharing opinions, experiences, and knowledge through carefully crafted sermons (MacDougall, 2011, p. 729). In this way, *TLP* positions its listening public to function akin to a Christian congregation, with the hosts (pastors) leading the listeners (congregants) through a series of podcast episodes (sermons). Therefore, as pastoral figures with great authority (given their extensive social connections and personal/professional résumés), *TLP*'s hosts offer constant, familiar, and expert voices that guide the community across episodes toward insight and wisdom. This hierarchical structure seems to support the objectives of a podcast community for people seeking a new space of spiritual belonging: it may align with the religious affinities and frameworks of its listeners, therefore helping nurture a shared sense of (post-evangelical) imagined communion.

Fostering Authentic, Grassroots Community

TLP also draws on podcasting's production and formatting affordances to construct a program that reflects its (seemingly) authentic and grassroots status, and that underscores the community's emphasis on intimate human connection between listeners and hosts. Podcasting often involves making contrived and arbitrary sound segments appear naturally continuous and unforced (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 282). The producers participate in this production by drawing together disparate audio pieces to reinforce the podcast's linearity and uniformity,

allowing it to fashion a shared listening experience that foregrounds *TLP*'s characteristic progressive and community-focused aesthetic across episodes.

As I have mentioned, each *TLP* episode begins with a pre-recorded advertorial clip in which a host introduces him/herself and welcomes listeners to the podcast. The host informs listeners about *TLP*-specific initiatives, which he/she invites them to look into (usually via *The Liturgists*' website), participate in, and support, sometimes through financial contributions. The introductory segments include various musical pieces to set the tone for the podcast's call to participation and action. They also signal transition to the episode's main segment, which usually includes the hosts' introductions of themselves and of the episode's discussion topic, co-hosts, and guests. The first few minutes of every episode thus consist of an introductory *TLP* advertisement, background and transitional musical pieces, and proceeding contextual content. Notably, however, *TLP*'s opening advertorial introductions are standardized, and are periodically updated (and subsequently retroactively inserted into all episodes) to reflect the community's new initiatives in a common practice known as "dynamic insertion" (Morris, Hansen, & Hoyt, 2019, p. 17). The podcast's use of dynamic insertion is not obvious (it did not occur to me until I re-listened to an episode and compared the audio with my written notes) and would likely go unnoticed by most listeners of the podcast. These aspects of *TLP*'s introduction illustrate how, despite the separate recording and piecing-together of several elements of the episodes during their production, as well as the asynchronous listening experiences of listeners themselves, the podcast "[ties] together the loose ends of narratives," joining together discrete auditory elements into a unified and affectively resonant whole (Drew, 2017, p. 207). *TLP*'s use of dynamic insertion in particular illustrates how podcasters can make use of the malleability of the digital to construct an illusion of "linear[ity]" in which "the content is heard as though it were live but with

the added convenience of being able to pause or rewind if desired" (Berry, 2006, p. 156). Podcasters can effectively mask the program's production to provide a semblance of continuity across time, allowing them to construct a particular listening experience and set of aesthetics that become characteristic of the community more generally and help reinforce its objectives—in this case, the construction of authentic, grassroots community.

TLP's musical elements also contribute to the podcast's sense of continuity and reinforce its affective aesthetic. Some of *TLP*'s sound clips get reused over the course of my dataset and are thus characteristic of the program. In Episode 37, Michael announces a "quick commercial break" to discuss and promote tickets for an in-person, "two-day liturgical experience" of connection and meditation featuring Michael, Science Mike, and *TLP* fans. This section is separated by auditory changes on either side. The music from the preceding segment changes to mark the transition to this new part of the episode (Michael's commercial break), and the new, happy tune serves as background music for the duration of his advertisement. When Michael's speech ends, so too does the music; it fades to brief silence before the next portion of the episode abruptly begins. In this example, two sound-based production elements disclose the show's construction. First, the initial change of song and the subsequent fading, silence, and abrupt return to music create segmental transitions and demarcations that, despite its smoothness (and, indeed, because of it), alert the listener to the show's distinctive non-liveness. Second, and relatedly, Michael's explicit declaration of the commercial intent of this particular segment signals to the listener a change in narrative tone and purpose that, combined with the other acoustic shifts outlined here, primes the ears to attend to this section's subtle artificialities. Podcasters may find participating in some of these editorial practices, such as "includ[ing] theme music and exclud[ing] awkward silences and sound irregularities," appealing for the sake of

cohesiveness (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 282). *TLP* embraces these editorial affordances to construct a sense of auditory linearity, allowing it to build and sustain the community's image of friendliness, inclusivity, and authenticity over time.

Not all of the melodies featured in *TLP* are familiar across or even within episodes, but music is nearly ubiquitous in *TLP* episodes and serves both practical and affective/rhetorical purposes. In some cases, melodies serve as aural signposts that signal, especially to the familiar listener, transition between different stages of an episode. In other cases, *TLP*'s use of music has rhetorical effect, punctuating the show's affections and messages by, for example, evoking excitement and suspense through staccato notes or underscoring the solemnity of a discussion through softer, slower tones. Therefore, like its other production choices, *TLP*'s use of music is strategic in maintaining a semblance of familiarity and continuity between disparate sound clips and in setting and reinforcing the tenor of a given podcast moment (Drew, 2017, p. 207). These musical elements ultimately help *TLP* to construct and maintain its progressive, grassroots aesthetic and bolster listeners' familiarity with the podcast and the larger community.

TLP also pursues linearity in its live episodes by adapting many of *TLP*'s usual editorial strategies. In Episode 63, Michael, Science Mike, and William, along with a few guests, hold a *The Liturgists* event in Los Angeles where they speak to a live audience on the subject of enemies. This content lacks the auditory clarity and editorial seamlessness that usually characterizes *TLP* episodes. An unfamiliar voice speaks into a microphone to introduce the hosts, and the audience erupts into applause. After a brief pause, one of *TLP*'s characteristic percussive excerpts begins, over which Michael speaks a poetic reflection about the dialectic of friends and enemies. The episode continues with a mixture of recited poetic and conversational segments, during which more *TLP* music occasionally enters the scene. Once again, music is used to

signify transition, but it is not accompanied by the same clean cuts and shifts as in the regular shows; the audience's cheers and laughter often fill the gaps. Thus, despite the temporal demands and editorial limitations of the live environment (the hosts do not have the luxury of editing content or integrating external segments into the live environment as they normally do), the podcast still pursues some degree of auditory cohesiveness. The hosts also maintain *TLP*'s usual musical and narrative aesthetic through its integration of the podcast's characteristic music, transitory segments and pauses, and poetic-conversational tone. This episode therefore includes some elements of *TLP*'s normal production strategy, through which the hosts are able to maintain the community's cohesion and aesthetic in the live context. At the same time, this episode is unquestionably live, and its untouched, casual aesthetic works to the community's benefit by showcasing the hosts in a seemingly unadulterated, and thus authentic, light. While *TLP* episodes generally maintain a casual and intimate tone—the hosts frequently joke, laugh, and exchange expletives with each other, and usually speak to one another in a way "that resembles a free-flow conversation between friends" (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 282)—*TLP*'s live episodes accomplish this performance in part through their very lack of editorial interventions. Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo (2019) note in their study of Black and Asian podcasts that fostering an image of authenticity "grants listeners access to the community," allowing participants to engage in discussions that contest power structures and inequalities (p. 271). In the same way, the live episodes serve as a reminder of *TLP*'s general commitment to (in-person) grassroots connection, reinforcing its marketing as an authentic podcasting community that joins together, and deeply cares for, dispersed groups of people navigating their Christian faith.

In addition to these more formal editorial strategies, which the community uses to construct a sense of authenticity across episodes, *TLP* also embraces podcasting's affordances to

highlight its commitment to grassroots community. *TLP*'s apparent status as an intimate online public that is spearheaded and sustained by members themselves (people who feel alienated or excluded from fundamentalist religious groups) explicitly surfaces in its self-referential emphasis on "liturgy," the meaning of which the hosts highlight throughout the podcast. In Episode 13, Michael notes that a liturgist is "[s]omeone who creates or directs liturgy," and adds that "[i]t's the work of the people. This podcast kind of caters toward people who might not have a liturgy that might not help them [*sic*] much anymore. We have a manifesto of sorts." In this definition, Michael somewhat sidesteps the term's more general use—referring to a rite or practice, such as baptisms, weddings, communion, and music services, in which religious congregants participate—to specifically invoke its more literal, bottom-up, participatory spirit. The term *liturgy* within the podcast's title "serve[s] as an identifying textual anchor to give the listener an idea of what to expect" (Heise, 2014, p. 4), immediately signalling (to prospective listeners and others) the community's progressive, inclusive, and grassroots preoccupations.

The active, participatory ethos that *TLP* embraces in its marketing also materializes in the episodes themselves as the hosts encourage and reward audience participation and input. They frequently ask listeners in advance of a particular episode (either at the end of the previous episode or on social media) to submit audio messages and emails with their thoughts on a particular topic, many of which they integrate into the show and occasionally respond to. These contributions, largely anonymous, usually take the form of short, personal sound clips composed of prose or poetry, and are often used as introductions or segues to a new subtopic or to add more diversity to the range of experiences expressed. For example, Michael, Science Mike, and Rachel Held Evans begin Episode 83 by discussing whether they identify as Christian and noting the baggage wrapped up in such a label. The conversation cuts to a series of anonymous voice

messages in which *TLP* listeners explain whether they identify as Christian and what the label means to them. Another show from my dataset, Episode 89, further illustrates how the producers incorporate listener feedback into the program, as the episode consists of an amalgamation of listener-requested segments from past episodes. This episode serves as a sort of fan favourite highlight reel which seems to give listeners some influence over the direction of episodes. The hosts use the podcast and various online platforms to encourage fan participation, which listeners can respond to and occasionally see the fruits of in the program, thus gaining assurance that they are actively contributing to *TLP*'s general narrative and community direction (Bottomley, 2015, p. 51-52, 57-58; Florini, 2015, p. 216). In these ways, *TLP* takes advantage of podcasting's status as an "interactive, demassified, and asynchronous" medium (Boling & Hull, 2018, p. 95) to offer listeners some opportunities to participate in the podcast from a physical distance.

Earlier, I discussed how many of *TLP*'s contributors are prominent and accomplished cultural figures, and that the podcast showcases their work and accomplishments to augment the community's authoritative status. In other cases, however, the hosts invite family, friends, and acquaintances with less social prestige. In doing so, the hosts highlight their commitment to the perspectives, experiences, and work of the (unknown) people within *TLP*'s community, ultimately reinforcing its grassroots status. Some episodes feature the work and projects of the hosts' (non-famous) family members. Michael's young daughter, Amelie, participates in three episodes of my dataset. Episode 81 opens with a discussion between Amelie and Hillary in which, as a preface to the episode on manhood, Hillary asks Amelie how she would define the terms "masculinity" and "femininity." This back-and-forth segment ensues with Hillary, a therapist with expertise in the body and sexuality, asking the girl casual, age-appropriate questions about her opinion on gender roles and similar topics. In Episode 27, Michael

interviews Amelie in a similar back-and-forth style. He first explains, and then asks her daughter's opinion on, the philosophical multiverse theory which considers the existence of possibly infinite universes. In another example, partway through Episode 59, Amelie's voice enters unaccompanied. As an introduction to the proceeding discussion, she notes some statistics on major global issues and the necessity of fighting them:

> Hi, I'm Amelie and I'm 6 years old. Just like you, I'm a human being who lives on planet Earth. I'm a really lucky kid because I have things like clean water to drink and healthy food in my refrigerator. But if you adults don't start taking better care of the earth, that might not always be the case. Here are some numbers for you: one million humans net are added to the earth every four and a half days. To feed all of those people, we are gonna have to produce more food in the next 50 years than we have in the past 10,000 years combined. […] You have to learn to work together, take care of this beautiful home of ours, so that it can keep taking care of us.

Episode 31 features Michael and Science Mike's personal friends Hae-Jin and Jacob Marshall, who share their experience of receiving an online prophetic message from an alleged prophet. In Episode 9, Science Mike invites his pastor to speak on the topic of finding and fostering safe church communities. Finally, Episode 59 features outer space aficionado and filmmaker Guy Barrington Reid, a friend of Michael's and Science Mike's whom they engage in a conversation about the grandeur and mystery of earth and space.

In contrast to the contributions of accomplished religious and cultural figures—which, I have argued, facilitate the podcast's host-listener social power structure and imbue the community with authority—*TLP*'s inclusion of the voices of (semi-)anonymous family, acquaintances, and listeners signals the community's concern for members' wide array of religious experiences, perspectives, and concerns. These sound clips stand in for the audience, allowing individual listeners to imagine their stories and experiences alongside those of other members of *TLP*'s listening public (Zehelein, 2019, p. 153). Whereas the program's hosts provide a sense of guidance, leadership, and authority to help instill cohesion into a post-

evangelical listening public that may otherwise be and feel quite dispersed, the community's embrace of a range of lesser-known voices gives countless unknown, individual listeners a sense of being heard, valued, and understood, reinforcing the community's emphasis on authentic, grassroots connection. Appealing to individual listeners in this way strengthens the sense of communion with and allegiance to a community of likeminded listeners and reinforces *TLP*'s general liturgical (people-driven) ethos.

Invoking and Reimagining Evangelical Narrative Traditions

The formatting strategies, creative aesthetics, and personal contributions highlighted in the previous section illustrate how *TLP* embraces podcasting's affordances to construct the hosts' authority as well as the community's sense of authentic, grassroots community. In this section, I argue that *TLP* makes use of narrative strategies reminiscent of those common in traditional evangelical settings while integrating progressive elements to reimagine them in the interests of its listening public. In this way, *TLP* draws on practices that register with the religious and affective affinities of post-Christians in particular as they recall some of the shared rhetorical and textual traditions embraced in the formal religious contexts with which they are familiar. In doing so, the hosts appeal to listeners' progressive interests and reinforce their connections, loyalties, and membership to a larger post-evangelical community.

Testimony

First, by regularly integrating the first-person stories and histories of hosts, guests, and listeners, *TLP* evokes the evangelical tradition of giving one's testimony. Rooted, in part, in the belief that a Christian should be prepared to share about the work of Jesus in their life (particularly with

non-believers, in hope of converting them to the faith), giving testimony is a familiar activity in the evangelical experience. I have experienced two main iterations of testimonies. A Christian may tell an audience or group (large or small, depending on the context) an emotional story of a specific time in their life in which they battled hardship (addiction, family issues, mental health problems, etc.) and then eventually "met Jesus," who helped them overcome those issues and inspired them to live a life dedicated to God. Another form of testimony occurs when a Christian tells a more comprehensive life story, which may include details about their upbringing, some of their significant struggles and/or life experiences, and their current "relationship with God." Sharing testimonies often takes place at church services, youth camps, conferences, educational contexts, and outreach ministries. In some cases, an event's leader may choose someone to tell their testimony as a rhetorical strategy to set the occasion's emotional tone and to increase the likelihood of religious conversions.

The integration of first-person stories in *TLP* episodes—some of which I have already mentioned in this chapter—evokes a narrative practice reminiscent of the Christian testimonial tradition that I am highlighting here. Listeners encounter one iteration of the testimonial tradition in Science Mike's telling of his so-called conversion story, which he repeats in several podcast episodes. We hear a version of this story in Episode 39, which is dedicated to talking about his book, *Finding God in the Waves*. In this testimony, Science Mike highlights growing up in a conservative Christian church, then eventually turning to atheism for a time before having a spiritual encounter that revitalised his awe and love for God. This story follows the general flow of Christian testimonies, with the notable difference that it concludes on a much more peacefully ambivalent note than many I have personally encountered in Christian settings. Science Mike ends his testimony openly, acknowledging his love for both God and science and adding that

there is much he does not and cannot know about the world. On the other hand, in my experience in evangelical settings people tend to conclude with a more confident, performative proclamation about the status of their newly renewed and unwavering faith. Science Mike's telling of his testimony in this episode illustrates how *TLP* navigates the tension between invoking the evangelical traditions with which its listeners are familiar while maintaining a more balanced posture toward the content of one's religious experiences and an open mind to the unknown.

Episode 3 captures similar tensions. Near the end of the episode, Michael recounts being raised evangelical and reading the Bible regularly in his youth with the assumption that his biblical knowledge would help him overcome some of his personal problems. Eventually, however, he began to contend with some of the Bible's inconsistencies and came to reject it altogether, but later gained some respect for it as a religious text. He describes his uncertain posture toward the Bible given that it is often used to justify hatred, but notes that it also provided comfort to his family after the birth of his daughter with Down syndrome. Like Science Mike's testimony, Michael's embraces tensions, uncertainty, and an evolving relationship to Christian faith and the Bible—elements characteristic of *TLP*'s post-evangelical ethic and narrative practice. Also noteworthy about this example is the introduction of acoustic music partway through Michael's story to intensify the emotionality of his testimony as he explains learning about his daughter's diagnosis while in the delivery room. The song changes near the end of his monologue to a percussive tune, which signals transition from Michael's story to Science Mike's response. Viewing such musical decisions as part of a larger narrative strategy, I argue that *TLP*'s integration of poignant acoustic music during the telling of testimony recalls the similar use of worship music in traditional religious contexts to punctuate the emotionality of a given event or moment, including during testimonial moments. Whereas church leaders promote

an emotional experience with some objective of facilitating attendees' experiences with God, the podcasts' hosts invoke the Christian worship music tradition within *TLP*'s narrative moments to increase the affective and nostalgic intensity of a shared acoustic experience among the podcast's post-evangelical listening public.

The stories highlighted in the podcast may recall the Christian testimonial tradition even if their content clashes with traditional theological beliefs and practices, as evidenced by stories featuring non-Christians and/or people whose identities are traditionally marginalized within evangelical contexts. For example, Episode 49 highlights the personal testimony of the hosts' acquaintance, Leng Lim, who was once a devout Christian but eventually transitioned to Buddhism after he struggled with the apparent irreconcilability of his homosexuality and Christian faith. At the age of 30 he came out as gay to his conservative Christian family, who refused to talk to him for several years and tried to convince him to attend conversion therapy to change the nature of his sexual attraction. He explains that his parents' views began to shift over time to the point where they started to show acknowledgment and acceptance of his gay identity, and he eventually reconciled his relationship with them. Here, the association between Leng's individual story and broader religious narrative traditions may seem somewhat obscure, particularly because his story, and its affirmative inclusion on the podcast, ultimately sanctions two identities (gay and Buddhist) that evangelical contexts would usually delegitimize or condemn. However, this example illustrates how the content itself does not necessarily need to fall within traditional evangelical territory to have nostalgic or emotional effect; *TLP*'s many narrative flows can capture the spirit of the evangelical tradition internalized by its listeners despite the details of the individual stories. Indeed, in this example the progressive content seems to augment the narrative power of the testimony, aligning with the (presumed) progressive

interests of *TLP*'s audience. Leng's story also follows a narrative arc similar to those in many of the evangelical testimonies I have encountered in which the speaker faces a period of struggle or a "falling-out" of faith before finding resolve and returning to some state of normalcy. The telling of Leng's testimony thus evokes the Christian narrative tradition while the content pushes the practice into *TLP*'s post-Christian territory, carving out compassionate space for experiences that fall outside of evangelicalism's traditional sexual and religious tenets.

Here, I wish to highlight a personal example of how podcasting's proclivity for storytelling and narrative—particularly, *TLP*'s embrace and reimagining of the Christian testimonial tradition—can be used to conjure intense emotion. As I have mentioned, the late author and advocate Rachel Held Evans, who died in 2019 at the age of 37, discusses her books and shares insight about cultural and religious topics in several *TLP* episodes. Rachel's impact in the progressive Christian community was substantial: her blogs and books (beginning in 2010) made waves as some of the earliest notable texts, particularly of the digital era, intentionally challenging the socially and politically conservative theologies and practices of the American evangelical church. An outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights and social justice issues in the church, Rachel showed "a different way to be a Christ follower" (Gehrz, 2019, para. 8) and "fiercely insisted that God's love included everyone, [while attempting] to offer those who'd been shunned by the church a way to return" (Griswold, 2019, para. 2). Rachel gave evangelicals around the world, including me at the time, permission to think progressively about their faith. As I began the data collection stage of this project after Rachel's death, I found listening to her episodes in particular to be incredibly emotional as I reflected on her legacy and impact, both in my life and in the church more broadly. When a person listens to a podcast episode, most often they are encountering in the present an audio recording from the past, however distant; this is

one of the distinguishing features of podcasting and live media such as radio. However, unless portions of an episode make reference to or otherwise reveal their asynchrony, any disjunctions between recording and listening or time and space are not necessarily at the forefront of the listener's mind. This was not the case for me as I listened to Rachel's episodes after her death. Any illusion of synchronicity that the podcast otherwise maintained vanished as the sound of Rachel's voice, and the emotions and memories that accompanied it, reverberated through my body and mind (Douglas, 2004, p. 29). Having extensive and quick access to the past in the present is one of the affordances of a digital era marked by "large memory capacity, long-life battery power, file archiving on the Internet, and digital encoding" (MacDougall, 2011, p. 715). Podcasters benefit from these technological developments as they can capture voices in time, archive them, and share them with dispersed audiences, effectively "free[ing] the listener from the ephemerality of speech" (MacDougall, 2011, p. 729). In some cases, the ephemerality of the audio may loosen listeners' grips on time and place, situating them within an auditory zone of blissful temporal oblivion. In other cases, as I experienced here, the sound and tenor of a beloved voice now absent outside of digital space punctuates the pain of loss and momentarily disrupts the "aesthetic colonization" of the audio (Bull, 2005, p. 350). Whereas podcasting is normally conducive to a blurring of lines between one's self and one's outside context such that "[t]he world becomes one with the experience of the iPod user" (Bull, 2005, p. 351), nostalgic podcast content may facilitate the opposite experience: an acute awareness of the necessary dislocations between what one hears and what one sees and knows. In terms of *TLP*'s appeal to Christian narrative traditions, podcasting's affinity for storytelling has potential to evoke memories and emotions that intimately remind the post-evangelical listener not only of their own religious

experiences, but also of the indelible communion they hold with others—past and present, and across time and space—within their listening public.

Speaking in Tongues

The *TLP* hosts also discuss and integrate another evangelical discursive practice known as "speaking in tongues." Most common in so-called charismatic Protestant denominations, which recognize the physical movement of the Holy Spirit through the work and bodies of Christian believers, tongues is a phenomenon in which a person is purported to speak, through the power of the Spirit, in a foreign or heavenly language. Despite being a fairly popular practice within some Christian denominations, it is controversial even among evangelicals, with some claiming it is performative rather than an authentic experience with God. I have encountered two main explanations in support of the use of tongues. Some claim that God chooses to impart upon a Spirit-filled individual the miraculous gift of speaking an inspired message in a foreign language, which an interpreter present at that moment will translate and deliver to an individual who will understand. Other denominations integrate tongues frequently into their weekly meetings, viewing it as part of a collective worship practice that believers can enter into, often at will, to connect more deeply with God. In Episode 75, the four hosts discuss the phenomenon of speaking in tongues at length before engaging at the end of the show in a casual, and ultimately entertaining and humorous, experimental exercise of speaking in tongues together (with the exception of Science Mike, who explains that the Baptist church of his youth condemned tongues and, therefore, he has never spoken it). Integrating tongues into this episode as one of its narrative practices is a gesture and appeal to the experiences of (ex-)evangelical listeners, many of whom would have direct experience with the practice. Rather than romanticizing the tradition,

however, the hosts discuss, interrogate, and critique it; their experiment generates a response of curiosity and laughter, as well as a general posture of uncertainty, peace, and openness to the workings of a mysterious universe. Here, the hosts navigate a balancing act: they acknowledge the familiarity of the phenomenon of speaking in tongues for many listeners while approaching with curiosity, humour, and gentle critique a tradition that is deeply revered and normalized, and thus rarely questioned, within some evangelical settings.

Contemplative Reading

Like the other traditions outlined above, the final two *TLP* narrative practices that I wish to highlight, contemplative reading and introspection, both align with and diverge from traditional evangelical contexts. While different in content from Christian practices, I argue that *TLP*'s artistic and mystical textual segments (including the reading of poetry and of non-biblical books) as well as its meditative activities have the goal of ushering listeners into (virtual and auditory) personal and collective contemplative spaces not unlike those pursued within traditional contexts. For most evangelicals, prayer and personal contemplation are integral to a healthy spiritual life, with the Bible as the central text around which it is based. The Bible is often read in prayerful silence as part of one's regular personal spiritual discipline, as well as actively integrated into church services, small group studies, and other public Christian settings via a combination of individual/silent and shared/audible readings of passages. A church leader often directs such activities before proceeding to offer a more detailed interpretation and discussion of the text. Similar to the evangelical church, *TLP* strongly roots its identity and practices in individual and collective contemplative exercises. The podcasting community's particular post-

evangelical ethos arises here, however, in its frequent embrace of non-biblical readings and textual practices to form a listening public that is spiritually curious, critical, and open-minded.

While the hosts offer many of their spoken contributions spontaneously via casual conversation, in several instances they also present non-spontaneous readings of their work. This work is often poetic in nature, such as in Episode 45 when Lisa engages in a recited reflection about death during a discussion of a Gungor song on the same subject:

> And we come to death. What is it like? Like birth, we all experience it, yet it is shrouded in mystery. Some have been on the edge of it, felt death's hand upon their hand, pulling them into the unknown, voice calling, beckoning them to the other side that is—what? Those close to it claim to see light or darkness. Some see their mother, some see their grandfather with outstretched arms, and some see a child gone before them. Some see God. Some see nothing at all. Some struggle for the last breath, a labor like the pains of birth; like a baby grasping for its first breath, some grasp and fight for their last. Then some exhale gently, last breath soft and peaceful as they walk with death into the great unknown. As we stand on the precipice looking back on the life we wove, what we gave, what we took, let us see the grace in it all.

Such philosophical reflections are exceedingly common in *TLP* episodes, helping guide listeners into contemplative acoustic spaces as the hosts discuss issues related to religion, society, and politics. At the same time, various authors also share prosaic stories from their work, such as when Science Mike reads a portion of his book, *Finding God in the Waves*, in Episode 39:

> 'Can I sit in church here like an imposter?' she asks. 'Am I an imposter?'
>
> I take a moment to collect myself. Her honesty and vulnerability are too familiar: I, too, have sat in a room full of Christians and admitted I don't believe in Christ, or in any god at all. I tell her a story about a man walking along the shore of a lake. On his way, he runs into two fishermen. They're busy working, but he tells them he'll show them how to bring in people instead of fish if they come with him. The two fishermen drop their nets and follow him. I tell her one of those fishermen was Simon, who was also called Peter, and that he is one of the founders of the Church (with a big C). When Peter dropped his nets and followed the man, Jesus, he didn't know anything about the Messiah being a sacrificial lamb. He just heard the man's story and believed it enough to follow him.
>
> The Gospels are a collection of stories about Peter and the other eleven disciples constantly doubting, believing the wrong thing, or entirely missing the point about what Jesus was saying. So, do I think it's OK not to know what you believe and still be a part of the church? Heck yeah. In fact, I think that's exactly what following Jesus is about.

Like some of the stories told by (semi-)anonymous and well-known guests, this second, prosaic example is explicitly narrative in character. It differs from those earlier examples, however, in that it is prepared and read from a script (in this case, Science Mike's book), similar to Lisa's reflections on death. Both of these recent examples illustrate how the spoken integration of written work, whether poetic or prosaic in nature, contributes to the podcast's contemplative aesthetic. Poetic contributions in particular imbue the program with a meditative tone, with the potential effect of facilitating more abstract and philosophical modes of reflection than casual, impromptu speech. These recited narrative segments are reminiscent of the popular prayer and Bible-reading practices that Christians integrate into their spiritual disciplines. The Bible takes a central role in many believers' lives, usually viewed as the divinely inspired text that speaks to them through its stories, prayers, and psalms. On the other hand, prayer functions as a channel for speaking to God, which Christians may integrate into their reading of the Bible in both personal and church settings. *TLP*'s embrace and shared reading of non-biblical texts, including progressive personal narratives and poetry, as sources of sacred wisdom and inspiration evokes the introspective elements of these Christian traditions while reinforcing the community's post-evangelical contemplative and intellectual spirit.

Introspection

TLP also embraces introspective practices in its episodes to help listeners cultivate mindfulness, peace, and gratitude. I situate introspection as a narrative practice here because within the context of the podcast, the hosts guide listeners soothingly, with words and stories, through contemplative exercises involving varying degrees of cognitive and physical participation. Soft instrumental music often plays in the backgrounds of these activities as well, contributing to the

narrative's affective sentiment. The hosts facilitate meditative activities that are based in both Buddhist and Christian principles, which they outline most clearly in Episode 93. In this episode, Michael, Science Mike, and Hillary reflect on the spiritual and physical benefits of meditation and discuss how the practice encourages mindfulness as a way to foster compassion and inner peace. In this way, *TLP*'s use of meditation evokes Christian introspective traditions by using quiet contemplation, sometimes paired with open readings of religious passages, to help listeners cultivate inner peace, wisdom, and a deeper relationship with the Divine. However, Buddhist meditative practices differ philosophically and theologically from Christian prayer and biblical practices, and *TLP*'s contention about the benefits of meditation would be controversial among some fundamentalist Christians. In particular, Christians tend to oppose Buddhist and "new-agey" practices such as meditation that ostensibly seek wisdom, peace, and connection from within (the self) rather than from God. A popular Christian media site, *Christianity Today*, has condemned Eastern-originating practices like yoga and meditation for obscuring "a worldview in conflict with biblical spirituality" (Groothuis, 2004, para. 1), a position that Christians continue to take up and debate. Therefore, while some of *TLP*'s meditations integrate Christian prayers and Bible passages and thus seem to mimic parts of those traditions, the inwardly contemplative posture of *TLP*'s iteration ultimately distinguishes the podcast's practice from traditional evangelical ones.

Three examples of meditative activities occur in my dataset, which are guided by either Science Mike or Michael. Episode 53 replays a Patreon-exclusive episode that engages listeners in a Bible-based meditative activity for Lent, a 40-day period leading up to Easter where many Christians pray, fast, and reflect on Jesus' life and death. Science Mike begins the meditation by acknowledging that *TLP*'s listeners will hold various perspectives on Lent, the Bible, and

Christianity more generally, but contends that “Lent can meet us all where we are, that we can all follow Christ into the wilderness for 40 days in search of our calling and our place with God, whatever God means to you today.” He leads listeners through a “divine reading” meditation in which he recites a single biblical passage four times, encouraging listeners to engage differently with the passage each time by first reading it, then reflecting on it, praying about the lessons present in it, and asking what it reveals about God. Science Mike notes that he has chosen this activity “because of the communal expiration of Scripture [it] entails.” The goal of this meditation, he says, is not to engage in academic critique of the Bible or to construct firm beliefs about Christianity. Rather, the divine reading activity aims to “use the text [Bible] as a prayer to seek communion with God,” which requires, at the very least, an openness to its lessons. He asks listeners to quiet themselves and their environments in preparation for the meditation, and walks them through each of the four stages as he repeats a Bible passage, Psalms 51:1-5:

> ‘Have mercy on me, oh God, according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my inequity and cleanse me from my sin, for I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner, when my mother conceived me.’

Science Mike completes the meditation, then closes the episode by wishing upon listeners an “open … heart to the movement of God.” He also invites participants to share their reflections about their experience online with other *TLP* listeners. While this particular meditation is grounded in the repetition and careful contemplation of the Christian Bible as a way to gain deeper connection with the Divine, it is fundamentally contemplative rather than prayerful in the traditional evangelical sense. Science Mike also emphasizes the open-minded, low-pressure nature of the activity, encouraging participants to reflect on their own understanding of, and relationship to, the passage. Thus, while this meditation taps into listeners’ religious histories by

using the Bible as a guiding text to reflect on God during a Christian season (Lent), the activity is progressive in that it does not pursue or push a singular interpretation of the Bible as an evangelical sermon or pastor might. Additionally, in contrast with the traditionally top-down power hierarchies present in religious contexts, Science Mike's invitation to provide feedback via another medium (online) also encourages audience participation and strengthens "community and camaraderie" between hosts and listeners (Wrather, 2016, p. 58).

At the end of Episode 47, Michael leads an eleven-minute breath-based meditation. Soft acoustic music plays in the background as he gently encourages listeners to close their eyes while imagining that light, love, and grace wash away their fears and worries with each breath. He refers to the Holy Spirit and Christ throughout the meditation, and tells listeners to think of the light entering their body as God, which is indistinguishable from their body. This same sentiment also underscores Michael's concluding statement as he leads listeners in a reading of the Lord's Prayer, an activity that he describes as "let[ting] the light [that entered listeners' bodies] form into words." While Michael integrates Christian language and texts into this meditation and evokes the communal Christian tradition in his reading of the Lord's Prayer, he conflates Christian philosophies with Buddhist ones through his focus on the indistinguishability between God, people, and bodies. This episode therefore reinforces *TLP*'s particular post-evangelical, progressive spirit.

In Episode 67, Science Mike leads listeners through a meditation known as "loving-kindness," which focuses on cultivating a spirit of compassion and kindness toward oneself and others. The host draws parallels between this Buddhist practice and Christian spiritual disciplines, situating both as meaningful activities for people, both secular and religious, seeking spiritual enlightenment:

> This is a practice that originated in the Buddhist tradition, but secular people can engage it in a mindful capacity, and the act of sending love and kindness toward other people is very much in line with the teaching and practice of Jesus Christ. So this is a practice that people all over the spectrum of spirituality can participate in, can enjoy, and can grow from.

As in the previous meditation, Science Mike begins the activity by encouraging listeners to physically situate their bodies and environments in a way conducive to quiet, distraction-free reflection:

> I recommend silencing your phone using its do not disturb function or even airplane mode as you engage in this practice. Find a place where you won't be distracted or disturbed, and sit comfortably. You may choose to sit with a straight spine, or a more relaxed posture. Sit however you're able to for an extended period of time. This meditation will last about 20 minutes.

He encourages the audience to concentrate on the rhythms of their breathing and to reflect on the relationship between their breath and their body. He then asks listeners to envision sitting with five different people—themselves, someone they respect, a loved one, a casual acquaintance, and someone with whom they have a strained relationship—and articulating to that person, whether internally or aloud, the phrase, "May you be well. May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be loved." In the final case (articulating loving-kindness to someone with whom participants have a strained relationship), Science Mike encourages listeners to participate only if it is not too uncomfortable for them. He then validates any feelings and emotions that listeners are experiencing and gently invites them to consider what these feelings might disclose about themselves and their relationships. He concludes the episode by speaking the same loving-kindness benediction directly over the listeners. This meditation parallels the Christian tradition's (theoretical) emphasis on love, kindness, and forgiveness. Similar to a traditional sermon in which congregants are expected to maintain a posture of quiet introspection and take initiative for their learning and "relationship with God," Science Mike also situates "the ideal podcast

listener" as responsible in the sense that they prepare their bodies, minds, and environments for the meditative experience in ultimate pursuit of an "improved version of themselves" (Sharon & John, 2019, p. 335, p. 342). Ultimately, though, the activity retains a post-Christian focus on the individual's inward pursuit of wisdom. Rather than insisting on a particular interpretation of the passage, Science Mike encourages listeners' individual reckoning with the text, and he invites them to be gentle with themselves and attend to their feelings. The positive and empowering emphasis on the body within *TLP*'s meditations is also markedly different from evangelical traditions that situate the body as sinful, broken, and in need of God's redemption (I will discuss this perception more in the next section of the analysis). Finally, Science Mike's spoken blessing over the audience implicates each person in the meditation, as if the hosts and listeners, dispersed and asynchronous as they are, were not separated by time, distance, or the podcast technology through which they speak and listen (Zehelein, 2019, p. 153).

Some of the narrative traditions that I have identified here (the telling of testimonies, speaking in tongues, contemplative reading, and introspection) may elicit difficult memories and emotions for listeners with histories in evangelicalism. For example, in my listening of *TLP* I was reminded of the social and psychological pressure I felt to speak in tongues during my time in Christianity, as well as my subsequent feelings of failure and faithlessness when I, unlike many of my friends, did not "receive the gift." Such practices, even as *TLP* progressively reimagines and questions them, may conjure old, internalized notions about their difficulty or immorality. At the same time, *TLP* does some work to integrate and reimagine these Christian traditions in a way that may be more palatable, and even redeeming, for the members of its progressive imagined community, as the podcast acknowledges and then gently interrogates and adapts them. *TLP*'s appeal to and reimagining of traditional religious narrative strategies signals

its post-Christian impulse, including its embrace of more open-minded, spiritual, and progressive practices. Given some of these practices' strong ties to evangelicalism, integrating and readapting them within the podcast may not resonate as strongly with listeners not privy to these religious cultures. This is not necessarily to suggest that they would be unintelligible or insignificant for listeners without substantial fundamentalist backgrounds. However, *TLP*'s narrative strategies resonate particularly strongly with the podcast's main target demographic, post-Christians, because they allude to and unpack some of the specific religious traditions and cultures with which they are familiar. By acknowledging listeners' religious frameworks, experiences, and concerns, *TLP* taps into the collective cultural affinities of its listening public, reinforcing the commonalities between the otherwise dispersed and diverse members of its post-evangelical imagined community.

Conclusions

In this section, I have argued that the hosts of *The Liturgists Podcast* have "imagine[d] creative ways of presenting reality through sound" (Salvati, 2015, p. 234) in order to construct its post-Christian listening public. As an unregulated medium, podcasting has relatively minor barriers to entry and participation. As such, it facilitates technological and creative choices that allow producers to appeal to the specific interests, needs, and "cultural competencies" of their audiences (Florini, 2015, p. 213; see also Berry, 2016b, p. 9; Bottomley, 2015, p. 185; Tran, 2019, p. 293; Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 282). In particular, podcasting facilitates advertorial and fundraising strategies that might not otherwise be permitted in stricter commercial contexts (Cwynar, 2019, p. 319). *TLP* embraces these affordances to promote the various personal and commercial projects of its leaders, both indirectly and through more formal, *TLP*-produced

endorsements, by highlighting hosts' social capital and their personal and professional accomplishments. The hosts also invite a wide range of contributors to share their expertise, counsel, and experiences, ultimately situating these figures as the podcast's experts. I have therefore argued that *TLP*'s hosts serve as the community's authoritative pastoral figures who lead their congregants (the listeners) in wisdom and knowledge through a series of sermons (podcast episodes). The hosts ultimately provide guidance and leadership to establish cohesion and loyalty within a community otherwise separated by vast distance (MacDougall, 2011, p. 729). In doing so, they have fashioned an audio program that both supports and discloses their religious, communal, personal, and professional preoccupations and interests, helping bring to fruition *TLP*'s post-evangelical vision.

Podcasting also facilitates connections between hosts, guests, and audiences across time and space. As my case study illustrates, *TLP* takes advantage of podcasting's status as an "interactive, demassified, and asynchronous" medium (Boling & Hull, 2018, p. 95) to offer listeners opportunities to participate in the podcast from a physical distance, impacting the general impetus of the community and reinforcing its authentic, grassroots status. I have argued that *TLP*'s hosts construct its listening experience through a series of deliberate artistic and formatting choices in which they incorporate, edit, and remove spoken material and musical elements to intensify emotion, signal change, and appeal to the audience's specific and changing needs. *TLP*'s active, participatory ethos also materializes as the producers regularly garner and reward participation by requesting, integrating, and discussing audience contributions on the program and online (Wrather, 2016, p. 48). Including the voices of anonymous audience members signals the community's concern for listeners' wide array of religious experiences, perspectives, and concerns. These sound clips stand in for the audience, allowing individual

listeners to imagine their stories and experiences alongside others' and reinforcing their sense of being heard, valued, and understood (Zehelein, 2019, p. 153). Such social dynamics are crucial for podcasts. Host-guest relationships can sustain a podcasting community, while "[a]ctively soliciting feedback from peers and audience members" strengthens its sense of intimacy and communion (Markman, 2011, p. 560). By appealing to individual listeners in this way, *TLP* "closes the distance between listeners and the hosts' experiences" (Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019, p. 271) and strengthens listeners' sense of communion with and allegiance to a community of likeminded others. Notably, however, *TLP*'s commercial and advertorial practices ultimately contrast with the community's claims to anti-commerciality and the grassroots, community-minded, and authentic image otherwise highlighted in the podcast's branding and episodes.

One must consider the capacity for podcast hosts and listeners to achieve mutuality in their relationships. *TLP*'s marketing emphasizes the community's grassroots focus, and the hosts continually reiterate this point throughout the program. I have argued, however, that power inequalities are baked into *TLP*; the hosts occupy positions of authority and expertise and ultimately retain command over the content and format of the shows. The cultural industries as a whole are marked by ongoing power struggles, particularly for marginalized creators who experience discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes and policies in their work (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 284). Despite much of the early hype surrounding podcasting in particular, with its perceived ability to transform the digital landscape by centring a wide array of voices engaged in rational deliberation, inequalities within podcasting cultures are widespread (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 283). Cwynar (2019) notes that podcasting is embedded in capitalistic cultures that uphold discourses of meritocracy and self-determination despite the reality that, within the podcasting world, one's success often hinges on one's social connections and privilege (p. 321,

330). While *TLP*'s hosts occupy some marginalized positions—for example, William is Black and gay, Hillary is a woman, and Michael alludes to his Puerto Rican ethnicity—they have all achieved creative and professional accomplishments with considerable recognition in popular and religious cultures. The hosts' work in *TLP* is inseparable from these accomplishments: their outside recognition reaps podcast listenership and financial support, and the social and financial capital they accrue through the podcast benefits them personally and professionally. The hosts are, as Vrikki and Malik (2019) put it, "necessarily implicated in the wider corporate media environment" (p. 285). Podcasting's relationship to and embeddedness in commercial structures raises important questions about the extent to which podcast counterpublics can meaningfully "[resist] some of the dominant structures they stand against" (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 282). I reflect on these questions further in this project's concluding chapter.

TLP also makes use of podcasting's creative affordances and structural versatility to reinforce its post-evangelical listening public by appealing to the presumed religious histories and progressive preoccupations of its listeners. In particular, the program invokes some of the narrative, musical, textual, and affective practices of evangelical traditions through its use of testimony, speaking in tongues, contemplative reading, and introspection. On the one hand, the community acknowledges some of the narrative Christian traditions with which its members are (presumably) intimately familiar. On the other hand, it engages in a progressive reimagining of and engagement with these practices in a way that aligns with listeners' particular post-Christian sensibilities. In doing so, the podcast provides more than mere diversion; it invokes the religious frameworks and affective experiences of its listening public and "teach[es] through the affective power of sound" (Drew, 2017, p. 206). Highlighting familiar (and, for many, personally complicated) religious traditions within the intimate digital space of the podcast also helps

unsettle the “clichés and generalities [that] are regularly employed” within particular cultural and political contexts (MacDougall, 2011, p. 715). In this way, podcasting “can reorient the listener to the world, and the world to the listener,” helping shine light on, and provide new language to confront, discourses and practices that have become routine and common-sense (p. 715).

Podcasts exhibit “radiogenic” qualities (Tacchi, 2000, p. 292) insofar as they rely on and facilitate similar technological and social practices to those of their earlier counterparts while refashioning them to meet the needs of listeners in the digital era (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Podcasting, as an auditory, narrative-driven medium, is a particularly attractive choice for contemporary religious groups interested in building connections through the sharing of stories. Niche and marginalized groups, who may otherwise have trouble finding or accessing spaces of communion, benefit from “individual, private storytelling reaching out to the world of the similarly minded” (Zehelein, 2019, p. 145). Thus, just as early religious radio programs, centred around the voice and teachings of a beloved host, helped create and legitimize the community’s identities and values (Schulze, 1988, p. 302), the intimacy, semi-privacy, and social structure of the podcast make it an ideal space for contemporary religious groups seeking community and belonging. As I have shown in my analysis of the continuities between *TLP*’s practices and those of traditional Christian contexts, podcasting facilitates something of a “sonic recreation” of evangelical spaces and traditions, ultimately “preserv[ing] enough of that [religious] experience to invoke it in the minds of listeners” (Florini, 2015, p. 215). Like their earlier counterparts, religious podcast listeners also occupy “a state of anticipation” as they “[listen] *out*” with faith that the voice on the other end will provide comfort and communion (Lacey, 2011, p. 11). Similarly, *TLP* fosters an intimate and affective listening experience in which “listeners anywhere in the world [have] direct and on-demand *entrée* to private worlds otherwise often

hidden from view or inaccessible," and for which members might otherwise be demonized or excluded from their religious and social circles (Zehelein, 2019, p. 153). By offering listeners insight into experiences and lives to which they might not otherwise have access, the podcast effectively "binds" together people in a listening public, with possibilities to generate material, ideological, and political change (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 15). *TLP* thus fosters an imagined community with appeal to a post-Christian audience, allowing listeners to participate in (virtual) communion as they engage through audio with others' ideas and lives.

By nurturing an intimate listening public in which religious outcasts can connect with likeminded others, *TLP* fulfills part one of Fraser's (1990) notion of a counterpublic (p. 68). Fraser contends that private, close connections provide the internal foundation necessary for a public to develop common discourses, which they can subsequently use to engage in meaningful political and social mobilization. The next section will consider some of the specific progressive discourses that *TLP* constructs. I categorize these as *counter*-discourses as per Fraser's contention that counterpublics, including *TLP*, may draw on such discursive frameworks to contest those of mainstream systems (p. 68)—in this case, the fundamentalist Christian discourses and practices most prevalent in the United States.

Part B: Constructing Counter-Discourses

This section identifies three major discursive themes that arise through *TLP*: non-dualism/religion, race/white supremacy, and sexuality/gender. I show how these discourses are heavily informed by *TLP*'s non-dualism framework, which argues that mind-body dualisms have contributed, within western cultures and religious systems as a whole, to the destructive intellectual separation of people's bodies from their feelings and experiences. Within American

evangelicalism specifically, these frameworks have fostered a system that upholds the importance of a particular set of traditional beliefs over a critical, compassionate, and nuanced theology and practice, and that ultimately undermines and actively harms the bodies and lived experiences of marginalized groups. I demonstrate how *TLP* constructs its post-Christian sensibility by situating its progressive discourses *in opposition* to the theologies, practices, and politics of the American evangelical mainstream. *TLP* alludes to these evangelical discourses and practices in its episodes, and I also identify them through reference to popular news articles and by reflecting on my personal experience within evangelicalism. In doing so, I argue that *TLP* fulfils the second of Fraser's (1990) requirements of a counterpublic: constructing and employing discourses to challenge the ideologies and practices of mainstream publics (p. 68).

Non-Dualism and Religion

TLP situates many of its discourses within a framework of non-dualism. This framework identifies and contests some of the common dualistic philosophical constructs pervasive in western thinking, with a focus on the disembodied body/spirit dichotomy that underscores much American evangelical theology and practice. Traditional Christian theology sees the human body (considered emotional and full of "fleshly desires") as untrustworthy and leading people into sin, while the believer's mind and spirit are connected to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit[13]. In Episode 71, Michael explains the cultural impetus of this theological rationale, which he says is rooted in Enlightenment-era assumptions about the primacy of reason over emotion:

[13] Evangelicals believe that sin originated in the (biblical) first humans, Adam and Eve, and that all people inherit this sin. All humans (and their bodies), therefore, are inherently flawed, broken, and sinful, leading them into further cycles of sin and destruction. Due to their sinful ways, all people deserve eternal punishment after death (hell). However, they can receive forgiveness (and thus go to heaven) by repenting to God and placing their trust in Jesus, at which point a believer's life and spirit align with the will of God.

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> So much of our culture and religions in mainstream society are based in a sort of disembodied sterility that we inherited from the Enlightenment, but this is a reduction of reality. *When you shrink reality like this, ideas become paramount and the embodiment, the feeling of those ideas, becomes secondary.* … I've come to see that there is a better way to live, a better way to practice spirituality, that doesn't have to be so disembodied, phantasmic [*sic*], but instead involves the whole person, engulfs the whole person—spirit, soul, and body. [emphasis mine]

Here, Michael identifies the historical and cultural context of mind-body constructs and their relationship to the Christian church. He specifically alludes to religious and cultural institutions' use of these rational frameworks to privilege the domain of the intellectual (ideas and beliefs) over people's embodiment (bodies, experiences, and affects). In doing so, he highlights the arbitrariness and strangeness of these frameworks and positions the podcast to challenge the dualistic, "disembodied sterility" of the mainstream evangelical church's religious, social, and political discourses and practices.

A non-dual perspective is paramount to *TLP*'s religious discourse, manifesting in the program's guiding assumption about the fundamental interconnection between God and people. The hosts capture this position in their frequent reference to the notion of the cosmic Christ. In Episode 35, Roman Catholic friar and author Richard Rohr provides an introduction to this theological perspective. Richard describes himself as a mystic, which is a religious practice that rejects spiritual and philosophical dualisms and embraces an affective, embodied, and experiential understanding of God. The cosmic Christ, as a non-dualist framework, is key to this perspective, as it emphasizes God's divine and eternal presence in all of God's creation. Whereas traditional Christian theology sees people as fundamentally sinful and therefore disconnected from God until they choose to repent of their sins, the cosmic Christ asserts that God's presence and influence are universal and within (and thus inseparable from) all people. *TLP*'s assertion that Christ is "all-embracing" and "nature itself" challenges the evangelical dualistic discourse

on two levels: first, by contending that the spirit of the Divine is present in and flows through everything; and second, by asserting that one's body (and its emotions, feelings, etc.) are inextricable from the (benevolent) Divine, and thus good.

TLP's embrace of the notion of the cosmic Christ also informs its progressive ontological shift away from traditional evangelical beliefs about God (goodness) and Satan (evil). In practice, evangelicals refer to God as a literal (gendered) being (hence their use of the pronoun "he" in reference to God) who acts intentionally in the world and in the lives of believers to bring his will to fruition. Many Christians therefore maintain a "man-in-the-clouds" conceptualization of a deity with specific plans and intentions for their lives. Evangelicals believe that God is good and ultimately desires to fix broken connections with his people, and that people can choose to restore this broken relationship by repenting of their sins and entering into a personal relationship with God through Jesus. However, God ultimately demands justice; those who do not turn to him are punished eternally for their sins in hell after death. Many Christians likewise hold a literal understanding of Satan as a diabolical being who presides over hell and tempts people into sin (separation from God) throughout their daily lives.

TLP responds to these traditional theological frameworks by situating God as a force, rather than a particular anthropomorphized being, that acts, moves, and is present in love. The hosts embrace a non-literal perspective that sees God as a presence that connects people to each other and reinforces their worth. For example, in a discussion about anti-Black racism in the United States in Episode 87, William describes God as a force that empowers the marginalized and oppressed and that tends toward justice:

> [God] is the energy on the ground that keeps rising up inside of weak and broken and poor people, the energy that actually empowers them, the spirit of God that empowers them to know that they are human, to know that they are loved, in spite of whatever the conquerors are doing and the oppressors and the suffering that's taking place …. So I

> think there is this energy, a forward motion in the cosmos, that is telling us that no matter the injustice of the moment, just hold on, there's always gonna be a change in the scale. And that to me is the fluidness of the universe, and oneness, too

In Episode 29, one guest frames the sacred not as "an object that we love," but as "the experience of depth we feel in the act of love itself":

> That is the return of the sacred: the community of individuals looking out for one another, loving one another, caring for one another—that is the new meaning of God. God is now where two or three are gathered together in love. That, for me, in a nutshell, is the trajectory of Christianity.

This perspective sees God as an energy that is present within people and communities grounded in compassion and concern for others. Similarly, in Episode 33 Michael conceptualizes God as the benevolent energy and presence that continually moves the world toward compassion, connection, and love:

> Whatever that is that's moving things, pulling things forward, pulling things into being, whatever it is that lies at the center of existence—I like thinking of that thing that makes the trees grow as the same thing that pulls me towards Black Lives Matter. I like that, somehow, whatever is the essence of things, that there's something of love in it, there's something of movement toward justice, toward wholeness, even though I know entropy exists, even though I know that there's chaos in the world and in the universe. I like seeing all that magic as connected somehow and seeing it all as connected. And to me, Spirit is quite a beautiful word for that movement, that essence, that ground.

As Michael's quote suggests, the hosts regularly refer to this holy presence using terms such as "Spirit" and "the Divine," underscoring the podcast's general non-literal, spiritualistic notion of God. In some episodes, the hosts' rejection of evangelicalism's traditional patriarchal and personified framing of God also surfaces through their use of she/her pronouns, as in Michael's reference to the feminine nature of the Divine in Episode 99.

On the other hand, *TLP* also separates itself from the evangelical teaching that situates Satan/the Devil as a literal, singular, tyrannical being who imparts eternal punishment on non-believers (Trollinger, 2019). *TLP* counters these repressive, literalistic discourses through a

metaphorical interpretation of Christian accounts about Satan and sin. For example, in Episode 25 Science Mike rejects the notion of a “single biblical Satan” that unilaterally seeks to bring evil and destruction to the world and turn people away from God. Instead, he contends that people “personify Satan into [their] own being and create a presence in the world very much like the biblical Satan.” A satanic force manifests, the hosts argue, in terrorism, mass shootings, racism, climate change, and other forms of violence and oppression. In Episode 89, Science Mike further contends that “we are all living in sin” to the extent that everyone, to some degree, is complicit in these systems, whether actively or through ignorance and denialism.

TLP’s religious discourse exemplifies its generally nuanced and metaphorical analysis of some traditional Christian stories and beliefs, including its reinterpretation of the foundational evangelical notions of God, sin, and Satan. This view holds God to be the benevolent and universal spirit that manifests in our actions, relationships, and communities and that moves the universe toward wholeness and love. On the other hand, the podcast addresses evangelicalism’s literal interpretations of Satan, the Adam and Eve “original sin” story, and the notion of repentance and forgiveness for one’s sins. As the hosts note in Episode 25, interpreting these foundational Christian narratives through an alternative, allegorical lens holds religious, social, and political instructive value. In the example of sin, this framework provides a progressive structure for understanding the insidious, persistent, and generational consequences of hatred and oppression. It also reinterprets the belief in God’s hatred for personal “sin” and his demand for individual repentance as a (far loftier) call toward political and social restoration at both personal and structural levels.

The hosts’ metaphorical reading of foundational Christian narratives underscores their broader commitment to, and insistence on maintaining, a nuanced posture toward questions of

spirituality and faith. They specifically discuss keeping a light grasp of their personal religious convictions, including the traditional, and ostensibly non-negotiable, beliefs with which they were brought up. This perspective arises in *TLP* segments related to embracing the unknown of faith, leaning into doubt, and asking questions. Michael likens having doubt to "being free," and describes it as holding one's faith with "loose hands" that are "not gripping, not grasping and [not] suffering from fundamentalist attachment" (Episode 83). In Episode 39, Science Mike recounts his experience of growing up in a fundamentalist environment in which "doubt was the boogeyman" to be avoided at all costs, lest a person lose their faith in God (and thus their salvation) entirely. He discusses Christians' fear of doubt as well as the value of uncertainty for guiding people toward love and into a deeper understanding of the expansive, impenetrable mystery of the universe:

> Doubt is only dangerous because of the fear we place in it, and the iron grip we have on our ideas. We make isles of our ideas about God and they replace God. They stand in front of God. And the gift of losing all my certainty, even my scientific certainty, was a crash course in this lesson of the mystics and the desert fathers and the spiritual leaders of humanity: surrender. There is no battle if you surrender. There's no battle with doubt, there's no battle with fear, there's no battle with hate. And all these things I can surrender and accept what is within me, and then when I look at the world, the actions I make are simply about desiring a world in which people are treated as I wish that I was treated.

In Episode 87, William discusses the value of uncertainty and doubt in relationship to the Bible, noting that he "would love to see a restoring of the true mystery, doubt, wildness, and blurring of lines that happens inside of the text, and just [its] wild breaking of rules." Dr. Peter Enns, theologian and author of *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More than Our 'Correct' Beliefs*, also discusses in Episode 3 Christians' general anxiety toward uncertainty and doubt. He contends that maintaining a posture of nuance and openness to the Bible's teachings actually imbues it with power, allowing readers to reflect on and learn from their changing relationship to its stories and teachings. Likewise, Michael expresses joy about the opportunity to

participate in a podcasting community in which he is able to active think about, wrestle with, and doubt God, which he sees as an opportunity to intellectually engage with the mystery and grandeur of the universe (Episode 99). My personal experience in the evangelical church has shown me that when Christians experience doubt in God and ask questions about the theological and practical implications of their belief systems, church leaders often provide simplistic, routine answers in an attempt to quickly guide the doubtful back to (a semblance of) faith in their particular rendition of the biblical narrative. Christians of (seemingly) strong faith often receive praise, while the doubtful may be treated as a conversion project. The podcast's open embrace and celebration of theological open-mindedness and uncertainty directly undercuts the evangelical culture that discourages and disparages doubt in one's faith and that insists on the authority and accuracy of a particular interpretation of the Bible.

For *TLP*, embracing doubt and pursuing a more open and progressive spiritual outlook can help usher Christians toward freedom and wholeness as they begin to let go of their assumptions about the nature of God and others. Becoming free of fundamentalist attachments may materialize, for example, in a rejection of the evangelical impulse to construct intellectual divisions between the saved (believers) and the unsaved (non-believers), or those who are "good" and those who are "evil." As the hosts contend in Episode 55, such divisions contribute to hostile social and political environments in which people fail to recognize the presence of God in their enemies as well as their own complicity in oppression. Rachel Held Evans reflects on her personal process of dismantling these divisions in Episode 83. She explains how learning to hold her faith loosely—learning to interrogate the evangelical systems that proclaim the accuracy (and thus unquestionability) of their specific beliefs—allowed her to begin contending with and

confronting some of the darker elements of her religious tradition, including the ways Christians have historically used their beliefs to inflict harm and violence on others:

> I feel like a lot of my spiritual practice, my faith practice, is looking at the language that I've inherited and trying to understand it better and looking at the stories I've inherited and how I might reappropriate them and understand them for good and use them for good, even the stories that have been used for harm. So that's what I kind of set out to do with this project [her book], was to take stories, especially the stories that have been used to harm, and see how they might be used to heal and to do good, and how the stories that I grew up with, understanding them in new ways—and is that a project worth taking on? And I definitely think it is.

William also captures *TLP*'s progressive religious ethos in a poetic reflection in Episode 99, wherein he contemplates the nature and manifestations of God:

> What is God if not everything and more? Like God in the particular, found in the hidden, in the subatomic, as well as the universal, right? Like, God in everything, God in moon, sky, sea, tree, air. What is God if not absolute love, if not the dream of the universe, if not the—the spirit that is pushing all things forward? Everything within evolution, everything within our lives, everything within our psyches. What is God if not the very dynamism that crafted the cosmos and that is perpetually moving all things forward? Who is God? I think God is in the person I often ignore. … God is in the space that feels mundane. God is in the excitement that I feel when I see someone that I love. Who is God? I see God in the face of Christ, in the face of Jesus. I also see Christ in the face of my neighbor, in the face of the poor, of the face of—dare I even say—my enemy. I see Christ, or I see God, on the lynching tree. I see God in history standing with Jews during the Holocaust. I see God with us, in and through time and space, often in places we don't think he or she is in. That's what I think about God.

I will discuss some of these racial undercurrents in greater detail in my discussion of *TLP*'s race/white supremacy discourse. For now, it is important to acknowledge that, from *TLP*'s standpoint, evangelicalism's dualism and strict allegiance to traditional beliefs inform a worldview that privileges intellectual certainty over an open and nuanced contention with the many manifestations of good and evil, including one's own relationship to systems of oppression. *TLP*'s religious counter-discourse therefore upholds a fundamental receptivity to the mystery and grandeur of God and the (often uncomfortable) process of unlearning one's assumptions about where—and, importantly, in whom—the Divine manifests. In doing so, it

challenges the evangelical commitment to certainty that disincentivizes and even renders unnecessary working toward structural change through its strict emphasis on the individual's, rather than the collective's, pursuit of personal salvation and relationship with God.

TLP's embrace of nuance and openness in its religious discourse also arises in its discussion of Christianity's central figure, Jesus Christ. The hosts note that the dualistic thinking of conservative evangelical denominations has contributed to the depoliticization, and fundamental misunderstanding, of the life, death, and mission of Jesus. A basic premise of the Christian story is that God took human form through Jesus, who chose to live alongside humanity before Roman officials killed him. While the motivation for Jesus' murder was political in that the Roman empire sought to thwart the influence and teachings of a man who claimed to be the Messiah (Klein, 2019, "The Gospels Portray an Indecisive Pilate"), the accepted refrain among fundamentalists is that Jesus simply "died for our sins." This view, known as the "substitutionary atonement" theory, holds that Jesus lived a sinless life in order to die on the cross to pay the penalty (as a "substitute") for humanity's transgressions, which people can choose to accept (through faith) or deny (for which they must pay the penalty in hell). *TLP* contests this dominant evangelical discourse through its embrace of alternative gospel[14] accounts. William offers one such retelling in Episode 87. Here, the host provides a Black perspective of Jesus' life and death and situates the power of the gospel in how it underscores the experiences of those who are on the outskirts of power:

> There was a poor man of color in the ancient world, marginalized by Rome because he was a Jew and belonged to Judaism. Born of an unwed woman, his life was meant to be despised and forgotten. We know him today as Jesus of Nazareth, or Yeshua. Yeshua challenged the political and religious institutions of his day by feeding the hungry, touching the diseased, laughing with prostitutes, and [spending time with] a whole host of unsavory characters. … The Bible is unique in its disclosure of the standpoint of the victim, which means God takes the side of the victim. … Thus, Jesus dismantles the

[14] The word *gospel* refers to the "good news" of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

> power, authority, and hierarchy of Satan, sin, and death, and builds civilization on a new logic, with Christ being the chief cornerstone. It is because of the cross of Christ that we now—you and I—live in a world that is concerned with victims, a world where the victims of Emmett Till, Recy Taylor, and Trayvon Martin have significant impact on you and me—where their lives and the lives of other people like them matter.

William reinterprets the fundamentalist account through a focus on the life, death, and political project of the Middle Eastern first-century radical, central to Christianity, who was ultimately murdered for challenging the religious and cultural status quo of his time. In this re-telling, William reimagines a foundational biblical text and challenges the taken-for-granted, routinely depoliticized, and historically and culturally removed account, widespread in Christianity, of a man who merely died as a sacrifice for one's sins. Instead, he reframes the purpose and impact of Jesus' life as a political project with continued relevance and applicability in the world and in the lives of marginalized groups.

Scholars have raised concerns about the historical and ongoing whitewashing of Jesus within western cultures and Protestant denominations as well as its relationship to Christians' political views. Biblical scholar Robyn Whitaker (2018), writing for *The Conversationalist*, notes that churches, museums, films, and other centres of cultural and popular work have a centuries-long history of perpetuating images of a white Jesus. Misrepresenting Jesus' race has important religious and political implications. As Kessler (2019) argues, doing so creates a disjuncture in Christians' minds between the life and death of the man they profess to worship and the experiences with racism and oppression that racialized people around the world continue to face:

> When we see Jesus as white, it becomes harder for us to honour the image of God in people who aren't white. When we see Jesus as white, we risk seeing Jesus as mainstream, rather than deeply counter-cultural. When we see Jesus as white, we risk missing how radical his death was, how his death closely resembles the deaths today of indigenous and black people at the hands of the state. (para. 5)

With this history in mind, Whitaker (2018) reflects on the ongoing political stakes of contending with the historical and cultural reality of Jesus' life and death:

> [W]hat would our church and society look like if we just remembered that Jesus was brown? If we were confronted with the reality that the body hung on the cross was a brown body: one broken, tortured, and publicly executed by an oppressive regime.
>
> How might it change our attitudes if we could see that the unjust imprisonment, abuse, and execution of the historical Jesus has more in common with the experience of Indigenous [peoples] or asylum seekers than it does with those who hold power in the church and usually represent Christ?
>
> Perhaps most of all, I can't help but wonder what might change if we were more mindful that the person Christians celebrate as God in the flesh and saviour of the entire world was not a white man, but a Middle Eastern Jew. (para. 13-15)

William's account confronts this historical whitewashing and depoliticization of the gospel. He argues that Black biblical representation is crucial because it allows people of colour to see their own experiences reflected in the story and life of the Jewish radical they follow, which reminds them that God cares about their oppression:

> [I]f I can't put the cross together in the lynching tree, how am I supposed to put it together in a cross 2000 years ago in Calvary? … These stories of today, Trayvon Martin, help me see the gospel because I see Christ in the broken body of Trayvon Martin, I see Christ in the raping of Recy Taylor, I see Christ in the maiming and the throwing in the river of Emmett Till and every Black and Brown and white person who was hung and Asian and Native American person who ever experienced genocide. And to know that it's not okay and that God says it's not okay and he's coming for the oppressed. … The story did not end with Jesus …. I've gotta put it together in the lynching tree, I've gotta put it together in who's oppressed right now …. I can read the biblical text, I can read the prophets, and really relate so much of it to today currently, and you feel like nothing has changed in 2000 years (Episode 87)

William therefore reframes the purpose and impact of Jesus' life as a political project with continued relevance and applicability in the world and in the lives of marginalized groups. In this way, *TLP* critiques the Christian cultures that not only routinely erase Jesus' history through, for example, the images of the white Jesus they perpetuate, but that also depoliticize the gospel

narrative in its failure to acknowledge the continuities between Jesus' lived experiences and those of racialized and oppressed people in the contemporary context.

TLP's claim that Jesus' life continues to bear witness to the immeasurable value and dignity of the lives and experiences of people of colour recalls this section's opening discussion about embodiment. Whereas traditional evangelical discourses tend to highlight people's sinful, broken nature, *TLP* maintains the absolute worth, importance, and beauty of all people, including the bodies and experiences of those who are systematically rejected, marginalized, and oppressed. *TLP*'s religious counter-discourse is therefore fundamentally rooted in a non-dualist, embodied framework, informed by the notion of the cosmic Christ, that sees "all of creation [as] the embodiment of God" (Episode 71). For *The Liturgists*, then, the "good news" of the gospel lies in its core contention, illustrated through the life and death of Jesus, that for all the ridicule, disempowerment, and oppression a person and their body might endure, people—*all* of them—are good.

Race and White Supremacy

TLP's religious discourse, centred on a framework of non-dualism and embodiment, feeds into a racial discourse that similarly emphasizes the fundamental goodness, beauty, and value of racialized people, their lived experiences, and their bodies. As *TLP*'s discussion of Jesus and religion suggests, the podcast's progressive racial discourse also assumes that racialized people, including their bodies and experiences, are inseparable from the Divine. For *TLP*, a post-Christian ethic must therefore include awareness of, and active attempts to dismantle, systems of white supremacy and coercion that (white) Christians have built and have continually enforced to undermine and oppress Brown and Black people. In Episode 71, *TLP* discusses this historical

mistreatment and oppression of marginalized groups by western colonialists. William shows how, historically, these disembodied frameworks—those that see a perceived separation between people and their feelings and experiences—fueled the dualistic thinking that informed colonialists' systematic devaluing and persecution of people of colour, whose bodies they coded as inferior. William notes that Christian colonialists engaged in "a type of abstraction from the body" by regularly treating foreigners "as savage" and "wip[ing] out" their religions and spiritualities in the name of Christianity. In doing so, *TLP* highlights the long Christian-colonialist history of violence against people of colour, which betrays, in part, their commitment to disembodied worldviews that deny marginalized people their humanity. Led by such illusions, Christian colonialists "could do whatever they wanted to people's bodies and make [them] fit to the ideal mind form" (Episode 71), such that when they looked down at the bodies of the Black and Brown people they degraded, the only perception they could gather was that this flesh bore no likeness to their own, much less to the spirit of the Divine.

TLP highlights the ongoing manifestations and consequences of these colonialist histories within the American context in particular. In Episode 69, Matthew Vines situates contemporary white American evangelicalism within this longer history of racialized abstraction:

> White, American Christianity has been morally compromised in a profound way from the beginning because it was introduced through violence, through genocide, through colonization, and that's not something that has ever been seriously reckoned with at a corporate level by white American or European Christians. So of course American Christianity has a foundation of white supremacy and Indigenous genocide and the enslavement of people from Africa.

Matthew also draws a direct line between Christianity's anti-Indigenous and anti-Black histories and practices on the one hand and American evangelicals' ongoing support of white supremacist systems, as illustrated by their overwhelming support for President Trump, on the other:

> So in some respects, especially the desire to maintain a racial hierarchy with white people at the top, the fact that 81% of white evangelicals voted for the living icon of white supremacy in the United States—in some respects, that is a natural outgrowth of the entire history of white American Christianity.

Michael repeats a similar sentiment later in this episode. He contends that evangelicals' mentality of exceptionalism in the religious realm—which centres around the assumption of being God's "chosen people" with the one set of beliefs necessary to receive salvation—begets a parallel posture in the political realm, spurring support for politicians who stoke their sense of religious and racial superiority.

TLP further discusses how the current American political climate showcases evangelicals' sense of superiority and their complicity in systems of white supremacy, as evidenced through their support for the aggressive racialized rhetoric and policies of President Trump. As Science Mike claims in Episode 69, for many evangelicals, "Trump is a political and military messiah" who "punches in the nose anyone who stands against what they see as the [white] gospel." Trump's antagonistic political approach fuels evangelicals' internalized beliefs about their own exceptionalism, lending support for his administration despite—and, indeed, because of—the leader's racial attacks. Many evangelicals continue to show enthusiastic support for President Trump with full awareness of his extensive record of harmful racial commentary—including continued and open derision of Black, Indigenous, Mexican, Asian, and Muslim people around the world—as well as his active enforcement of policies—such as travel and immigration bans—that unduly target those same demographics (Graham, Green, Murphy, & Richards, 2019; Wadsworth, 2018, para. 40). Trump's embrace of a "white gospel" is also captured in his administration's slogan, "Make America Great Again." This slogan invokes an idealized notion of a "better" nation presumably in contrast to the increasing diversity and political consciousness of the contemporary American public, and equally recalls the exceptionalism of Christianity in

its contention of an enlightened "us" against an inferior "them." It further captures the proselytist spirit of evangelicalism (and Trump's evangelical supporters) insofar as it implies an Other (person, land, country) that must be "made great"—a key impulse of colonialism and the practices of conversion it has fostered and justified. For *TLP*, evangelicals who support President Trump are therefore necessarily complicit in the white supremacist and racist systems that his slogan, policies, words, and actions directly and indirectly lay bare. *TLP*'s racial counter-discourse thus directly confronts "the history of evangelicals' participation in and support for racist structures in America," a current iteration of which is their overwhelming support of the current United States president (Butler, 2019, para. 2).

In an instructive history of American evangelicalisms' support of Indigenous genocide and slavery, Wadsworth (2018) notes that millions of Christians used the Bible "to defend white supremacy and black subordination" during America's slavery era (para. 25). Similarly, Tom Gjelten (2020), in an *NPR* article titled "White Supremacist Ideas Have Historical Roots in U.S. Christianity," argues that white American Christians' use of the Bible to justify slavery meant that "[a] belief in white supremacy was a foundational part of Southern culture" (n.p.). The centrality of white supremacy to Christian theologies and practices has led, Gjelten says, to a continued "theology of inaction" in which white American evangelicalism prioritizes its concern for "win[ning] souls for Christ" over the pursuit of racial justice (n.p.). These priorities have led, in turn, to a failure on the part of evangelical denominations to address and dismantle the systems of oppression on which they were built and continue to profit. In my view, what makes *TLP*'s racial discourse particularly impactful—although to some extent the same could be said of the other discourses explored in this thesis as well—is the simple fact of its iteration within (post-)Christian space. The evangelical denomination is structured, after all, around a politic and

practice of conversion; it maintains that it has the message of salvation that non-believers need to hear, and actively sends out missionaries to share it. There is little room for critique in such a system. Christians have historically justified racism and oppression—including chattel slavery in the United States and residential school systems instituted in the 19th and 20th centuries to assimilate Indigenous youth into Canada's Christian cultural and religious systems—by framing their work as biblically sanctioned, even mandated, in order to discipline (Christianize) the ostensibly "savage." Evangelical churches continue to evoke this colonialist complex through missions, often to poorer Brown or Black communities, that aim to bring God's will and salvation to non-believers through conversion to Christianity.

Despite these ongoing histories, I recall very little, if any, meaningful acknowledgment or discussion—from leadership or otherwise—of Christianity's relationship to white supremacy during my own time in the evangelical church. I also encountered deafening silence from the church in response to major socio-political events that disproportionately impact marginalized groups, including racialized minorities. Meanwhile, I travelled with my youth group to several countries sharing a message, primarily with Black and Brown people, that I was never taught or equipped to truly contend with or unravel in my own life; my mission was merely to share it, blindly defend it, and hope for the best. Regretfully, the bar is set so low that by merely recognizing these troubling histories and legacies within a space of Christian affiliation, *TLP* has taken the first step in developing a counter-discourse that opposes the evangelical culture that often hinges on silence, ignorance, and active complicity in white supremacy and oppression. As I have shown, however, *TLP*'s racial counter-discourse goes beyond allusions: it actively acknowledges the ways that Christians, and American evangelicals in particular, have historically employed and benefited from racist practices. In doing so, *TLP* seems to practice,

here as in its other discourses, what it appears to preach: a fundamental regard for seeing—and thus acknowledging, celebrating, and risking some comfort and safety in solidarity for—the humanity in the racialized Other.

Sexuality and Gender

TLP takes up similar ideas of non-dualism and embodiment in its discourses of sexuality and gender. Like *TLP*'s discourse of race and white supremacy, which affirms and celebrates racialized minorities and challenges the American evangelical systems that have systematically oppressed them, the podcast's sexuality and gender discourse also assumes that women, LGBTQ people, and other minorities, and their bodies and experiences, are inseparable from the Divine. Hillary takes the lead in many of these discussions, offering her therapeutic expertise on topics related to religion, trauma, and bodies. Informed by non-dualistic and embodied standpoints, she gently rejects evangelicals' hardwired belief that the body and emotions are fundamentally sinful and deceitful. In Episode 71, she explains that people should not disregard their visceral corporeal responses to (perceived) danger. While many people interpret these somatic responses as fickle and emotional—a sentiment that Christians routinely internalize via the church—Hillary insists that the body often instinctively responds to external traumatic triggers as a protection mechanism. In Episode 97, Hillary similarly reflects on her ongoing journey of listening to her body and learning to recognize its goodness in the midst of chronic pain:

> I have a history of being pretty violent towards my body, and that was something that in a way I participated in, I was a part of …. And in the journey of healing from this wound I was carrying within myself, I learned to tell a new story about my body: that my body is good, that I am good, that I am my body … that my body is a temple, quite literally, this is where the Divine lives, that I am sacred. All of these things were so instrumental in my healing.

Hillary locates her shift toward a more positive and compassionate relationship with her body in her realization of the presence of the Divine in her, which allowed her to see her body as sacred rather than broken. She notes that "shifting [the] discourse" of her body toward one of non-dualism has made her more compassionate toward both herself and others because she sees people's suffering as a response to pain and trauma rather than as a mark of their inherent brokenness. This embodied framework underlies much of *TLP*'s counter-discourse on gender and sexuality. As Science Mike notes in Episode 39, such a discursive reframing rejects the disembodied theologies that condition people to dismiss others' painful experiences, treat their feelings as futile, and absolve perpetrators, which serves to compound, rather than treat, people's guilt, shame, and pain.[15]

TLP discusses how the evangelical church's theological commitment to disembodiment facilitates unhealthy sexual and personal relationships in particular. In Episode 73, Hillary notes how dualism leads to a fragmentation of people's experiences and prevents them from experiencing the fullness of their relationships:

> [I]n cultures where we have a dualistic definition of human experience where the mind and the body are separate, [there is a notion] that anything related to the body is fragmented or shut off and kind of dissociated from the full experience of being human. … I think it's pretty hard for us to be integrated and experience the fullness of pleasure and joy and relationship when we've cut our bodies or our feelings off from other parts of ourselves.

Hillary explains that these disjointed frameworks "limit our expression or our experience of ourselves and other people," ultimately limiting people's abilities to form meaningful and healthy experiences and relationships. As Science Mike discusses in the same episode, western cultures and religions have embraced disembodied relational systems to inflict harm. He outlines

[15] I have encountered many (dismissive) Christian platitudes in response to pain and suffering, including the popular notion that "God doesn't give you more than you can handle."

a brief history of monogamy and notes that in recent decades, religious groups have normalized heterosexual frameworks and weaponized them in order "to disproportionately benefit men and to carry the implicit assumption that women are property." Here, the host problematizes monogamy as a cultural construct often used in religious contexts to justify control over women and their bodies. For *TLP*, such systems underscore an engrossment in disembodied frameworks that fail to recognize the needs, desires, experiences, and value of some (marginalized) people and their bodies while centring those of the privileged.

Similarly, the hosts critique the cultural and religious systems, including those embraced by the evangelical church, that uphold patriarchal social structures and that shroud bodies and sexuality and guilt in shame. These systems reinforce toxic gender roles and negative self-perceptions by teaching men not to show emotions (considered feminine and weak) and alienating women from their bodies (treated as impure and secondary to men's needs and desires). Hillary highlights some of these power imbalances in Episode 71. She explains how western cultural narratives about sexuality perpetuate inequalities between men and women by feeding into and reinforcing the objectification and undermining of women's bodies in particular, ultimately marking their lived experiences as trivial:

> [T]here's an important conversation to have here about what it's like [for women] to live in a culture where there's pervasive sexual trauma around the corner for, you know, half the population …. The #MeToo movement really identified that—that sexual trauma is everywhere—and what we know with trauma is that just the threat of it, especially if you've experienced it before, is enough for you to feel unsafe and on guard and hypervigilant. So I think we've got a cultural narrative which devalues lived and felt body experience, and privileges cognitive and cerebral activity as the seed of our consciousness, but then we've also got a culture which makes it really unsafe for us to live in our bodies and tells us that our bodies are bad or are dangerous for us.

Here, Hillary notes how women are often put in an impossible position where they face disproportionate threats of sexual trauma, yet onlookers—informed by cultural and religious

disembodiment narratives—often disregard and ignore their pain or blame victims (and their bodies) for their trauma and oppression.

TLP's position directly counters the purity culture, rampant in American evangelicalism, that condemns some (and in some conservative denominations, all) expressions of sexuality outside of the context of heterosexual, monogamous marriage (Ingersoll, 2019). Purity culture disproportionately hurts girls and women, who are taught from a young age that their premarital sexual decisions will render them "damaged goods" (Rine, 2013, para. 7) and that their sexual (mis)conduct (including "immodest" clothing choices that expose the midriff, knees, shoulders, or chest) serves as a "stumbling block" to boys[16]. Evangelicalism's purity culture supports a pervasive anti-sexuality ethic that approaches issues of sexuality and gender with fear, secrecy, and control. *TLP*'s discourse also confronts the church's ongoing complicity in, and silence toward, abuse and sexual assault. Within the context of personal relationships in particular, fundamentalists maintain the so-called complementarian belief that men and women have separate, God-given strengths and gendered family/societal roles (which "complement" each other). These gender scripts are to manifest within the (heterosexual, married) household through a man's spiritual leadership and financial provision and in a woman's obedience as well as her emotional support and nurturing of her husband and children[17]. Both complementarianism and purity culture underscore a thoroughly entrenched conservative religious system in the United States that positions women (and their personal and sexual needs and desires) as inferior to men and that prioritizes men's comfort and success over the safety and well-being of women.

[16] Evangelicals' interpretation of the biblical story of Adam and Eve—in which Eve ostensibly went against God's will by leading Adam to commit the original sin after she "tempted" him to eat a piece of forbidden fruit—informs the pervasive belief that girls and women are inherently seductive, tempting, and capricious.
[17] See the "complementarian umbrella" graphic for an illustration of this belief: https://twitter.com/sheilagregoire/status/1050803475276283904

In addition to facilitating inequity within personal relationships, evangelicalism's religious-sexual culture also engenders unhealthy power dynamics at a systemic level. For example, Graham (2018) contends that within evangelical churches, "leaders—typically men—are generally assumed to have God-given authority" (para. 1). Therefore, religious institutions often maintain a culture of secrecy and silence around individual and systemic assault, inside and outside of the church, "in the name of protecting God's work" and those who are engaged in it (i.e., men) (Graham, 2018, para. 1). American evangelicalism's complicity in abuse also emerges within the political system, as illustrated in the October 2018 hearings between American professor Christine Blasey Ford and now-Supreme Court Justice (then-nominee) Brett Kavanaugh. Scores of evangelicals showed substantial support for Kavanaugh, praising his defence of religious freedoms in particular (Jackson, 2018, para. 9) and revelling in the prospect of a Supreme Court Justice with a conservative judicial history (Wilson-Hartgrove, 2018, para. 2). Despite Blasey Ford's sexual assault allegations and the days-long hearings in which she publicly recounted her emotional and traumatic experiences, Republican senators—who receive the majority of the white evangelical vote due to their perceived "family values," namely their moral and political opposition to abortion (Jelen, 2017, p. 1)—overwhelmingly voted in favour of Kavanaugh, leading to his ultimate victory. Evangelicals' enthusiastic support of Kavanaugh and their callous indifference to Blasey Ford's sexual assault allegations represents just one manifestation of the heteropatriarchal culture rampant in the church that systematically denies women their agency and teaches everyone, including women themselves, to view their bodies and experiences with suspicion, disregard, and contempt (Gelsinger, 2018, para. 24). *TLP*'s counter-discourse contests these frameworks, and the sexist systems and worldviews they uphold, as they manifest in the American evangelical context in particular.

Given fundamentalism's heteronormative culture and condemnation of homosexuality and same-sex marriage[18], evangelical beliefs also preclude LGBTQ+ people from enjoying sexual relationships. LGBTQ+ inclusivity and affirmation are assumed in *TLP*; the community actively rejects the church's homophobia and hosts LGBTQ and LGBTQ-affirming guests on the show. In Episode 87, Michael laments those parts of the "Christian tradition that [need] reform and [need] protest," including the historical condemnation of queer people "in the name of God." Episode 69 also features Matthew Vines, LGBTQ activist and author of *God and the Gay Christian*. In a discussion of Christian views of homosexuality, he says that "while I can have a lot of respect for the hearts and motives and good intentions of non-affirming Christians, non-affirming theology is morally wrong at a deep level, and does profound damage in the lives of LGBTQ people." *TLP* thus emphasizes the harmful impact of homophobic teachings and practices on LGBTQ people whose identities and bodies are often treated as fundamentally flawed and abominable. For example, queer people are often denied leadership positions in the church, and "coming out" to their faith community and family can cause permanent damage to their relationships, leading to loneliness, depression, and suicide. As highlighted in Episode 49's discussion with Leng Lim, family members and church leaders may also insist on conversion therapy to "reverse" a person's homosexual orientation; if they decline, they may face threat of exclusion from the community altogether ("'It Was Devastating,'" 2020, para. 14).

Evangelicalism's deeply entrenched homophobia also contributes to a culture of anxiety in which LGBTQ allies fear exclusion from their faith communities for expressing support. As Michael recalls in Episode 89, he experienced tremendous anxiety in advance of publishing *TLP*'s May 2015 LGBTQ episode (not part of my dataset) because, he says, "at the time, I did

[18] Many conservative evangelicals believe that God intends marriage to be between one man and one woman. Any violation of this marital arrangement constitutes sin.

not know any Christian people that came out as affirming that didn't lose their whole career because of it." Michael then shares a voice clip that he recorded immediately before announcing the episode on Twitter. This clip captures the intensity of Michael's fear and uncertainty in that moment as he reflected on the importance of Christians showing support for marginalized groups, no matter the cost:

> I'm about to push send on a tweet announcing a podcast on the LGBTQ issue. I'm terrified; I can't push it. I'm afraid because I know what it's probably gonna do to us. I know it could potentially end our careers in the Christian music scene, and that sort of is our career. But I don't know how I can say that I'm a Christian and be in the Christian music scene and follow this Jesus who teaches radical love and revolution, speaking against oppression from religious powers. I don't know how I can just bow my knee to religious powers out of fear of not talking about a taboo issue, not telling people that they're beautiful, when there are so many other people telling them that they're not. I wanna be a part of whispering love into people's ears that need to hear it, and singing beauty over the ashes, over the people that have been devastated by what people have told them God thinks of them. So I guess I'm gonna do it. I guess I'm gonna push send.

North America has seen important advances for LGBTQ+ rights in recent years, including the United States' Supreme Court Ruling, made one month after the release of *TLP*'s LGBTQ episode, that legalized same-sex marriage across all states. Some Christians and evangelical denominations also continue to contend with their beliefs about homosexuality, with increasing numbers taking affirmative and inclusive LGBTQ stances. Still, Coren (2020) notes, "most evangelicals—a deeply significant group in the U.S.—remain steadfastly conservative" (para. 2). Research by The Pew Research Center confirms this point: while more than half (54%) of all American Christians accept homosexuality, only 36% of evangelicals hold those views (Murphy, 2015). American evangelicals' continued non-affirmative stance on LGBTQ issues was made explicit when Franklin Graham, a famous American evangelist and son of the renowned late evangelist Billy Graham, responded to the recent June 2020 Supreme Court decision to protect LGBTQ workers by calling it "a very sad day" (Dias, 2020, n.p.). *TLP* underscores the immense

personal costs of both navigating a queer identity and expressing solidarity with queer people within a religious community steeped in anti-LGBTQ hostility and hatred. In doing so, the podcast draws on a pro-LGBTQ+ discourse that actively affirms the value and beauty of queer Christians and explicitly condemns American Christianity's ongoing history of homophobic teachings, attitudes, and practices.

In the United States, discussions about LGBTQ rights often occur in close proximity to abortion debates. Abortion is a key political issue for Republicans, and their evangelical supporters, in particular; Taranto (2018) calls it "the single most important litmus test in American politics" (n.d.). *TLP* critiques the American religious culture that shows uncritical, unilateral support for anti-abortion politics and conservative politicians. In Episode 69, William points out the hypocrisy and harm of Christians who focus on abortion and same-sex marriage at the exclusion of structural issues such as racism, misogyny, and sexual assault. He contends that these perspectives send "the implicit, undeniable message … that tolerance of racism and misogyny and sexual assault and you name it are not as important in what it means to be a Christian as being against same-sex marriage" and abortion. The hosts, along with Rachel Held Evans, also engage in a lengthy discussion of abortion in Episode 23, a show dedicated to the topic. They discuss the current polarization of the American political climate, a dynamic they attribute in part to the intensity of the pro-life/pro-choice ideological division in the United States. Rachel expresses similar frustrations about Christians who oppose abortion but who do not support the politicians, education, and healthcare policies that would reduce abortion rates:

> What frustrates me is when someone is adamantly pro-life but also adamantly against contraception, sex education, [and] government support for single moms. That's a huge disconnect and a very frustrating one for me. To me, where people fall on the 'where does life begin?' question is less important than where people fall on [the] 'how do we actually curb the abortion rate?' [question]. We will not stop abortion by making it illegal, but we stop it by putting it out of business the old-fashioned way: driving down

> demand. I don't know if that will ever eliminate it. But I really think we could do better, especially in the U.S., at curbing it. It's not rocket science.

In Episode 73, Science Mike attributes the disjuncture in the United States between evangelicals' pro-life position and their voting records to (mis)education, including a failure of sexual education within schools and churches. He also notes that evangelicals' tendency to "[rely] on shame as the primary mechanism for sexual control in people's lives" has contributed to their unhealthy and dysfunctional sexual cultures and to the intensity of American abortion debates.

These episodes engage in pointed critique, both implied and explicit, of evangelical support for the Trump administration. As I have discussed, the American religious right shows overwhelming support for socially conservative, "pro-life" Republican candidates, ostensibly out of concern for fetuses' "sanctity of life." President Trump, who has a "staunch anti-abortion agenda," has been no exception; his conservative views on abortion have helped him garner much of the Christian vote ("White Evangelicals Distinct on LGBTQ Rights, Abortion," 2020, para. 8, 5). Trump has committed, for example, to supporting pro-life politicians, judicial nominees, and policies, having claimed that he "would veto any legislation that weakens pro-life policies or that encourages destruction of human life" (Orr, 2020, para. 12). Evangelical support comes in spite of Trump's record of mistreatment and violence toward women, including accusations of rape, bragging about sexual assault, a history of infidelity, and "a lifetime [of] using women for his own gratification and then tossing them away like garbage" (Linker, 2020, para. 11). The so-called pro-life movement is therefore, according to Linker (2020), less interested in saving fetuses than in controlling women's bodies (para. 12). *TLP* underscores the hypocrisy in evangelicals' support for Trump and sees it, as Science Mike notes in Episode 73, as indicative of the church's larger commitment to maintaining power and control over women.

Notably, *TLP*'s hosts do not all individually adopt firm pro-choice stances on abortion, as one might expect given the community's otherwise strong commitment to progressive political and religious ideals. In Episode 23, the hosts and Rachel disclose their personal feelings of moral uncertainty about abortion, and they agree that they would not elect to have an abortion themselves. They engage in a brief discussion about the merits and moral implications of the belief that life begins at the moment of conception, which is widely adopted by evangelicals and used to justify their anti-abortion position. Rachel also admits that she thinks "elective late-term abortions should be illegal." At the same time, she acknowledges that this particular timeframe "is completely arbitrary" and that her perspective is entangled in her socio-economic privilege, which she says would afford her considerable flexibility and freedom in terms of her ability to deal with an unplanned pregnancy.

Despite the hosts' sometimes ambivalent personal positions on this issue, however, they maintain the undeniable necessity of supporting other people's sexual choices, despite one's personal preferences, in order to move toward a healthy sexual ethic that works for everyone, as Science Mike's reflection in Episode 73 indicates:

> [M]y sexual script, if you will, has to make room for people to make their own sexual decisions, because I understand the script I was given from the church is largely based on an ethic that considers women to be property and not partners in marriage. My sexual ethic must include an understanding of the inherent dignity and beauty of same-sex relationships, of differing sexual orientations, of differing gender identities, and indeed, must honor people who consider themselves to be asexual, who are so frequently forgotten in discussions of sex and sexuality …. I think to be healthy, we have to be very open-minded and open-handed toward the sexual practices of others, structuring our legal ramifications around the barest possible consent and power dynamic interpretation of a sexual ethic. In that way, we can also be free to explore a deeper personal understanding of sexuality that includes our faith, our life experiences, the tradition our family is within, and how much we choose to identify with that. I'm a lifelong, married, monogamous Christian in my personal sexual ethic, but in my societal sexual ethic, I think informed consent and education are the backbone of a valid perspective on sexuality.

In a poignant reading of her work in Episode 73, author and embodiment coach, Jamie Lee Finch, summarizes much of *TLP*'s gender and sexuality counter-discourse and its critique of evangelicalism's damaging sexual culture:

> Stop telling women what they can and cannot, should and should not do with their bodies. Teach them about the worth and the value of their bodies. Teach men about the worth and value of our bodies. Speak of intimacy, speak of connection, just speak about sex at all. Stop misinterpreting a myth to say it was the naked body of a woman that caused the downfall of humankind. Stop taking that myth literally in the first place, and start prioritizing pleasure. Stop telling women what to wear. Start telling men not to rape. Keep telling men not to rape. Tell them again, and tell them again, then tell them again, and again, and again, and again, and then one more time again because they still don't seem to fucking get it. Stop circulating the lie that it's a virtue for a man to make the decision to not be alone with a woman. Stop telling men to guard women's hearts as if they own something that's not theirs. Stop telling fathers their daughters' virginity is their responsibility, as if they own something that is not theirs. Start telling girls the good news that there is no such thing as virginity in the first place. Talk about autonomy. Talk about respect. Talk about consent. … Tell women their bodies are not the problem. Stop asking what she was wearing. Stop asking what she was drinking. Stop saying anything other than 'I believe you.' Stop telling women they're less sexual than men, stop telling women they're less visual than men, stop telling women that men only want one thing. … Get rid of abstinence-only education and stop having conversations about intimacy, connection, and powerful communication. Start telling teenagers that their sex drives are normal, and then teach them again about autonomy, respect, and consent. Stop using metaphors for women's sexuality like 'plucked flowers,' 'damaged cans,' 'chewed gum,' 'crumbled paper,' and 'house.' … Stop telling anyone, ever, anywhere that sex is dirty, and start teaching them about the possibility of everything it can and could mean for them, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, when treated like the incredible, embodied, erotic experience it has evolved itself into being.

Similar to *TLP*'s other discourses, its sexuality and gender counter-discourse challenges the disembodied evangelical cultures that exclude, delegitimize, and erase the bodies and lived experiences of gender and sexual minorities, and that actively work against their wellbeing and health. It also critiques the Christian frameworks that deny people the right to bodily autonomy and that use the Bible to justify control and abuse. For *TLP*, a sexuality and gender counter-discourse reframes those of the American evangelical mainstream by making space for the goodness of all bodies, celebrating the wide range of sexual and gender expressions, and calling

for educational and political structures that equip people to make healthy and informed decisions about their bodies. This discourse is rooted in a framework of embodiment and non-dualism which sees all bodies and experiences as valuable and legitimate and that positions a healthy sexual ethic within a context of personal autonomy, mutual respect, consent, and physical and mental wellness. *TLP*'s counter-discourse therefore rejects the evangelical church's complicity in patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia at both individual and structural levels, including its dedication to conservative policies that impede the ability of marginalized groups—especially women and LGBTQ people—to make informed decisions about their bodies and lives.

Conclusions

Following from the previous section's argument that *TLP* draws on the specific technological, production, and creative affordances of the podcast format to construct an intimate listening public comprised of people with similar progressive preoccupations and concerns, this section has examined the major discourses around which *TLP* operates and constructs its identity as a post-evangelical counterpublic. I have identified three major discursive frameworks that *TLP* employs. First, I argue that the hosts construct a religious counter-discourse centred primarily around a framework of non-dualism, which contests western cultural and religious distinctions between the mind and body. According to *TLP*, dualism informs evangelicalism's disembodied theologies, which privilege the intellectual realm ([correct] beliefs and the mind) over the physical realm (bodies and lived experiences), even at the expense of people's spiritual, physical, and mental wellbeing. *TLP* responds to these mainstream evangelical theologies and practices by constructing a discourse that upholds a nuanced, metaphorical, and open-minded reading of biblical narratives over allegiance to a narrow set of traditional, prescribed, and unquestionable

beliefs. This counter-discourse sees God as a benevolent and divine source present in the universe that manifests in and through everyone, imbuing all people with sacred dignity and value. For *TLP*, that God is present in all things serves as impetus for theological, political, and social ethics and practices of compassion. Such an ethic contends with injustice and seeks structural change rather than advancing an individualized notion of salvation detached from broader political and social frameworks of inequality and oppression.

I have shown how *TLP*'s religious discourse, centred on a framework of non-duality and embodiment, also informs the community's construction of a race/white supremacy counter-discourse. This discourse highlights *TLP*'s concern for the bodies and lived experiences of racialized groups. It also rejects the evangelical theologies that have justified racism and racial oppression in the name of God and out of ostensible concern for others' spiritual enlightenment (despite whatever spiritual, emotional, and physical harm those projects have inflicted along the way). *TLP* confronts these histories through discussion of Christian colonialism (and its close alliance with racism and white supremacy) and its contemporary iterations, with particular emphasis on the overwhelming evangelical support in the United States for a government administration steeped in the language and practices of white supremacy. *TLP*'s racial counter-discourse offers indictment of a religious system—namely, fundamentalist evangelicalism—that preserves and actively participates in conversion practices with colonialist precedent while maintaining a general culture of ignorance and silence around issues of racial oppression.

TLP's sexuality and gender discourse also takes up the notions of non-dualism and embodiment in its positive and empowering view of the bodies, feelings, and experiences of girls, women, and other gender and sexual minorities. Rejecting the evangelical theologies and practices that actively devalue women in particular by treating them (and their bodies) as fickle,

weak, and subordinate to men, *TLP* advances a counter-discourse that foregrounds women's value, dignity, and physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. The hosts challenge the theological frameworks that inform gender hierarchies and abuses of power both in personal relationships and in religious and political institutions, and that cause Christians to undermine women and support their subordination and oppression. *TLP*'s sexuality and gender counter-discourse similarly affirms the identities, experiences, and value of LGBTQ+ people. It also condemns the rampant (allegedly Bible-sanctioned) homophobia that leads religious institutions to systematically deny these groups' full and safe participation in their faith communities and to undercut and erase their sexual needs and gender expressions. In doing so, *TLP*'s counter-discourse demonstrates a commitment to bodily autonomy, particularly in relationship to abortion, and criticizes evangelicals' support for politicians who hide sexism and misogyny under a "pro-life" veneer of concern for the lives of the "unborn."

As I noted in the discussion of abortion, listeners encounter some brief ruptures in *TLP*'s discourses as the hosts reflect on their individual difficulties with specific issues and as they work through some of the religious frameworks with which they were raised. Although the podcast overall maintains, in this case, a strong sexual ethic of autonomy and consent, these moments provide insight into how the hosts themselves continue to contend with, and enter in and out of, traditional evangelical discursive territory in their personal thinking. While these instances are not necessarily reflective of the community's general discursive positions, they show how *TLP*'s hosts occasionally maintain ambivalent, even supportive, positions relative to specific evangelical practices and beliefs, some of which fall within the purview of the discourses that the program otherwise contests. I see these dislocations not so much as existential crises in *TLP*'s otherwise largely uniform articulation of its progressive ethos, but as tensions

that ultimately betray the complexity and difficulty of the post-evangelical deconstructive project in which both hosts and listeners, individually and collectively, engage. These “more idiosyncratic moments,” in which hosts seem to confess or disclose their lingering traditional theological dispositions, may also be a consequence of podcasting’s capacity for narrative and conversational practices that are more “informal and personal” (Bottomley, 2015, p. 186). These moments may even constitute, for some listeners, one of the appeals of podcasting, illustrating how the medium can cultivate a “space where opposing views can co-exist, rather than the ‘echo-chamber’ associated so closely with social media or mainstream media” (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 279). In this way, podcasting facilitates an intimate, casual, and genial listening experience that can engulf both listeners and hosts, even (possibly) against their better judgment.

By focusing exclusively on the counter-discourses of non-duality/religion, race/white supremacy, and sexuality/gender, I do not wish to suggest that these are the only discourses present in *TLP*, or that they are the most “important.” As I noted in the methodology section of this paper, I have necessarily participated in “the constructive effects of discourse” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 2) as I have chosen, in all stages of this project, to pursue, preserve, highlight, and disregard voices and literatures as I have deemed necessary in support of my research questions. I could just as well have decided, for example, to focus greater attention on the discourses constructed around *TLP*’s pillars of “science” or “art.” I have chosen not to due to both time and space constraints and because I see these two sets of discourses, as articulated in the podcast, as more peripheral to *TLP*’s major discursive direction. The three counter-discourses that I have identified in this chapter are more constitutive of the podcast’s particular post-Christian ethos as whole, as *TLP* largely structures its program around, and actively contends

with, the major theological, political, and social histories, traditions, beliefs, and ongoing practices of the American evangelical mainstream.

I see *TLP*'s post-evangelical ethos as ultimately paradoxical, however. On the one hand, the community insists on a sort of "non-denominational" or "post-denominational" identity where all people can find commiseration and belonging, and *TLP*'s rejection of an explicit Christian label signals this desire. At the same time, I have argued that *TLP* predominantly constructs its major political and social discourses through a non-dualist and embodied framework that is fundamentally religious in nature, given its continued reference to people's value and dignity as a function of their likeness to God. This is not a traditional evangelical conceptualization of the Divine by any means, as I have explicated in detail. But that is precisely the point, and the reason I have decided to centre these particular discourses in my analysis. *TLP*'s embrace of a post-evangelical ethic, both in its production choices and in its discursive frameworks, discloses the community's ultimate objective: to provide a home—a new post-*Christian*, progressive space of compassion and acceptance—for those who feel misunderstood, betrayed, and excluded by the North American evangelical church. So while I maintain that *TLP*'s religious, political, and social discourses operate in clear opposition to those of the fundamentalist American mainstream in particular, marking the community's status as a counterpublic (Fraser, 1990, p. 68), *TLP* constructs this counterpublic identity most readily through an appeal to an enlightened, spiritual return to Christianity itself—a *new* Christianity; Christianity 2.0. Rather than rejecting or departing from Christianity altogether, then, or operating, as it claims, as a sort of neutral space for people seeking communion and support, *TLP* ultimately constructs its post-evangelical identity through a reimagination of Christian religious, political, and social practices and discourses. *TLP* embraces the creative affordances of the

podcast and the affective power of sound to call listeners back to the faith traditions they may feel have all but betrayed them. In doing so, *The Liturgists Podcast* not only invites a progressive, novel return to and reimagining of its listeners' religious frameworks; it also evokes the mediated listening traditions of the faithfuls before them who listened out in faith that others like them would join in their communion, trusting that the day's newest technologies would help them to do so (Lacey, 2011, p. 11; Schultze, 1987, p. 258).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this project, I have studied how *The Liturgists Podcast*, as a community located at the intersection of new media and religion, harnesses the auditory, technical, and creative affordances of podcasting to construct an intimate and inclusive listening public with warm appeal to the progressive proclivities and cultural frameworks of listeners navigating the tenets of their fundamentalist Christian faith traditions. My analysis has shown that *TLP* fosters a sense of progressive imagined communion through its use of production decisions and discursive constructions. First, *TLP* draws on podcasting's production affordances to fashion a listening experience that reproduces and occasionally adapts some of the evangelical theological and narrative traditions, frameworks, and practices familiar to its listeners, invoking the common progressive affective and nostalgic sensibilities of a physically dispersed public. Second, the hosts draw on a series of progressive religious, political, and social discourses that they position in contrast to those of the American evangelical mainstream. By privately nurturing intimate connections between individuals with similar preoccupations, then employing discourses to contest the ideologies and practices of mainstream religious systems, *TLP* operates according to Fraser's (1990) notion of a counterpublic (p. 68). However, rather than distancing itself from the Christian tradition altogether, *TLP* constructs its progressive counterpublic primarily through the framework of a return to a new, enlightened Christianity. This novel reimagining calls alienated listeners back with compassion and acceptance to the faith traditions that betrayed them, establishing their place in a longer history of mediated listening centred around hope in the imagined communion offered through the soundwaves of technology (Schultze, 1987, p. 258).

What do we make, then, of a counterpublic gone awry? On May 6, 2020, *TLP* released a podcast episode originally called "Fatphobia, Diets, & Self-Worth," with a registered dietician as

its guest. The episode received immediate online backlash as some listeners shared their frustrations and disappointment in *TLP*'s decision not to centre fat people in a discussion about diet culture and cultural assumptions about thin and fat bodies. *The Liturgists* subsequently released a statement of apology on their official Facebook and Twitter pages announcing a change of the episode's title to "Does Fat = Bad?" and committed to releasing another episode on fatness with a fat person as the guest[19]. Hillary also released an apology, and Science Mike, who stepped down from *The Liturgists Podcast* in October 2019, lamented on Twitter, "I believe impact matters more than intent" (McHargue, 2020). However, while *The Liturgists*' official apology, along with those of the other hosts, garnered a generally positive response, Michael spurred further opposition, disappointment, and anger within *The Liturgists*' online community after he released a separate statement on his Twitter page via a series of tweets[20]. J. Nicole Morgan (2020), a podcast host and author of *Fat and Faithful: Learning to Love Our Bodies, Our Neighbors, and Ourselves*, describes Michael's statement as a rambling non-apology "that began with impatience and snark and moved into defensiveness" (para. 10). According to Morgan, Michael's post focused on "maintaining the quality of the episode" as he cited "time and logistical constraints" that prevented *TLP* from finding a suitable guest before the episode's production (para. 10). Michael also "focused on his right to speak" as "[h]e worried about his ability to maintain his platform" if he had to find and feature a marginalized guest on every episode (para. 10). Ultimately, Morgan contends, *The Liturgists* did not live up to the community's stated commitment to include, uplift, and empower marginalized voices (para. 5)—and listeners, disappointed and angry, said something about it.

[19] https://www.facebook.com/theliturgists/posts/2694083067514979
[20] https://twitter.com/michaelgungor/status/1259316734441349120?s=20

I have made the overarching argument that *TLP* operates as a Fraserian (1990) counterpublic in that it fosters an intimate space of "withdrawal and regroupment" for individual listeners dispersed across distance and that it equips them with the discursive tools to contest the theological, political, and social ideologies and practices of the evangelical mainstream (p. 68). I bring the example of the recent controversy over *TLP*'s episode on fatness into focus because it illustrates well the tensions intrinsic in such a conceptualization. On the one hand, the counterpublic functions as a private or semi-private entity comprised of individuals; on the other hand, the individuals form a collective that works together in service of a shared discursive or ideological mission. In the first case, *TLP*'s listeners—many of whom, I have argued, are the questioners, doubters, and outcasts of a religious tradition with heavy allegiance to certainty in conservative, and often exclusive, beliefs—approach the community eager, but initially poorly equipped, to contend with the extensive baggage and impact of the darker side of these faith traditions in their lives. However, in the process of (semi-)private deliberation—accomplished through engagement with the ideas and stories conveyed in *The Liturgists Podcast* and its attendant online and in-person spaces—these individuals, formerly disempowered and distraught, take grasp of new frameworks to make sense of, and ultimately confront, the source of their pain and frustration. With these alternative frameworks in hand, listeners are able "to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). But the impact of the counterpublic arises not only in its empowerment of one individual, but in that it equips a collective of individuals, serving as "training grounds for agitational activities" against the larger public sphere (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). Armed with new language, the collective can "expand discursive space" as it works to interrogate the systems and frameworks

previously regarded as common-sense and unquestionable (Fraser, 1990, p. 67; see also MacDougall, 2011, p. 715).

As this thesis has highlighted, however, podcasts and their producers occupy complex relationships with both the broader media landscape and the capitalist systems in which they are imbedded; as Vrikki and Malik (2019) note, “podcasters are both willingly and unwillingly imbricated in the wider corporate media environment, thus revealing the messy, ‘sticky’ ways in which we might understand [online] counterpublics” (p. 274). In one sense, this stickiness seems to call into some degree of question longstanding visions of podcasting’s emancipatory deliberative potential as it draws attention to the presence of racial, social, and economic barriers and inequalities in the industry as a whole. The increasing popularity of a relatively accessible and portable technology does not necessarily translate to parallel inclusion and representation of people traditionally marginalized within spaces of creative and popular production (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 285), and the absence of fat representation on *TLP*’s recent episode on fatness makes this point clear.

But the controversy, anger, and subsequent online backlash that the episode’s lack of inclusion garnered also reveals something more about what—and whom—the counterpublic enables, even, and especially, in moments of apparent collapse. Publics depend on the production and movement of discursive texts to sustain “the lifeworld of [their] circulation,” but their discursivity is often invisible (Warner, 2002, p. 82). For *TLP*, the “poetic functions” of its “constitutive circularity” get conflated with real people actively pursuing progressivity, compassion, and grassroots community (p. 82), supporting the illusion of “an actually existing set of potentially enumerable humans” (p. 51). But while “a public is never just a congeries of people, never just the sum of persons who happen to exist” within it (p. 51), neither is it purely

discursive. I have argued that *TLP*'s progressive, grassroots ethos arises through a careful balance between appeals, on the one hand, to the individual (who acquires voice and belonging within the intimate space of the listening public) and appeals to the collective on the other. However, in its persistent pursuit of an identity that ultimately underscores listeners' membership to a larger post-evangelical imagined community, *TLP*'s balancing act tips toward the collective. *The Liturgists*' marketing and practical execution as a whole tend to operate around its embrace of a "multiplicity of voices," which subsequently renders indistinguishable, and thus secondary, the distinctiveness of the individual (Vrikki & Malik, 2019, p. 277).

But as *TLP*'s recent controversy reveals, individual voices can fall through the cracks in the foundation of the imagined community, disrupting, at least for a moment, the illusion of stability that the public's circulating texts otherwise maintain. This momentary disruption thus uncovers what the discursive normally masterfully conceals: that collectives would all but fade away if not for the individuals who comprise them. We therefore encounter in this example the counterpublic's great irony, which is that listeners, equipped with the language of the collective, can turn that language onto not only the practices and discourses of the mainstream, but back onto those of the subaltern that first empowered them. In doing so, the counterpublic becomes the architect of its own opposition, betraying the ultimate power of sound: when those on the peripheries are invited to listen, sometimes they talk back.

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