# Orthodoxy as Performance:

# Interpretation, Agency-Relations, and Performative Refashioning in Concerned Women for America

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# ORTHODOXY AS PERFORMANCE: INTERPRETATION, AGENCY-RELATIONS, AND PERFORMATIVE REFASHIONING IN CONCERNED WOMEN FOR AMERICA

This proposed project seeks to investigate the process by which the interpretations of cultural performances actively redefine the boundaries of acceptable action as well as the impact of these altered understandings on the binding of agents to a common organizational project. The linking of the ascription of distinct characteristics to particular constructed categories of people is an always ongoing contestation of the human (Butler 1990) that is inherently wrapped up in the distribution of capacity and domination that is, to some extent, the purview of human organizations (Weber 2013). This idea is captured here in the novel concept of 'performative refashioning'. Rather than seeing the performative redrawing of boundaries and cultural understandings as a break with past forms of interpretation of social action, the selection of the language of 'refashioning' is intended to highlight both the iterative continuity of the actor's experiences as well as to emphasize the potential resources for the pursuit of projects within existing systems of interpretation and meaning. While existing research on the performative re-creation of social interpretation either underscore its diffuse and incremental nature (West and Zimmerman 1987), places power and hierarchy outside of the performative act (Alexander 2006), or understands performances as the mechanism by which the exceptional is rendered legitimate (Adams 2005; Reed 2017, 2020) little scholarship has been done to understand the ways in which the performative *preservation* of existing interpretations of action can nevertheless *refashion* relational constellations of capacity and domination.

One of the most salient performances of an orthodox interpretation of identity in mainstream American society can be found in the well-documented patriarchal domination of evangelical protestants. However, one of the most consequential political mobilizations of the

20th century was the sudden emergence of political organizations almost entirely staffed, run, and led by evangelical women (Boyer 2008; Critchlow 2006; Diefendorf 2019; Ingersoll 2003; Johnson 2019; Schrieber 2008). This turn of events is doubly surprising when one considers how this community professes a deep commitment to the 'doctrine of wifely submission' (Johnson 2019). In this particular rendering of the social world, the ascription of distinct characteristics to individuals are based on a rigid gendered hierarchy that casts men as 'servant-leaders' and women as nurturing homemakers and emotional caretakers. How, then, did evangelical women come to be recognized as *legitimate* founders and leaders of some of the most influential political organizations in American history? Through what means were these women able to send and bind men—even their husbands!—to work on their behalf? Finally, how did the understanding of a woman's appropriate action expand so dramatically within the broader evangelical cultural milieu?

In order to investigate these questions, I will undertake a work of historical sociology centered around the founder of Concerned Women for America (CWA), Beverly LaHaye. I will examine both books authored by LaHaye as she emerged as a public and political figure in the evangelical subculture as well as archival data comprised of organizational newsletters, pamphlets, posters, and online articles. Using these data, I will be able to interrogate how LaHaye's performance of taken-for-granted understandings of evangelical womanhood intersected with the project of building a national-scale political organization as well as the binding of others to that project. The results of this proposed paper will have implications for our understanding of the dimensions of political action in the American religious right as well as the theoretical rendering of the relationship between cultural performances and the building of organizational power.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have been thinking through the ways in which the performance of a cultural identity allows for the (re)definition of social action in three primary ways. The first of these, the gender performativity paradigm, borrows a Foucauldian lens that understands cultural identities as something that are made anew with each successive performance (Butler 1990, West and Zimmerman 1987). The ways in which people 'do' a specific identity—most notably, the identity signified by their gender—involves a constant tension between the norms that structure everyday experience and the inherent instability of cultural systems based on continual un/re-doing by individuals seeking to realize their lived experience. The second perspective details the school of cultural pragmatics, following the scholarship of Jeffrey Alexander. Cultural pragmatists highlight how performances seek to "fuse" different performative elements in order for an actor to embody a cultural narrative or script that then comes to possess some level of verisimilitude in the eyes of the audience. This vein of intellectual work evaluates the success or failure of a performance based on the audience's perception of authenticity through their own identification with the collective representation on display by the actor (Alexander 2004). The third paradigm—the project framework—sees cultural performances as 'binding' power acts. Through variations in performances and interpretations of collective representations, social actors are able to legitimately embody an identity that is situated within a hierarchical web of power, violence, and authority (Adams 2005a, 2005b; Reed 2016, 2017, 2020). The variable enactment of a particular social identity allows for an ongoing process of reinterpretation that opens space for new constraints, possibilities, and contingencies within an existing system of power.

### Gender Performativity

Nowhere has the advancement of social identity as performance seen such widespread sociological impact then in scholarship seeking to investigate the performative nature of gender and sexuality. Most notably, West and Zimmerman's now-classic 1987 article highlights the iterative ways in which gender—through a repeated process of interaction—is continuously constituted as a routine performative accomplishment based on a "normative conception of men and women" (West and Zimmerman 1987). These ideas are built upon by the philosopher Judith Butler whose books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004) provide a phenomenological investigation into the ways gender is actively constructed on the stage of society. For Butler:

> "…that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender boarder control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the 'integrity' of the subject" (Butler 1990:173).

The performance of a social identity—in this case, the identity of a particular binary gender—not only provides that identity's salience in the moment, it constitutes the social reality in which the actor is in relation. However, this process is not unilateral. The performative constitution of any social identity is rooted in a process of evaluation based on "the social norms that constitute our existence" which "carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood" and thus act "as a precondition for the production and maintenance of legible humanity" (Butler 2004). Thus, the performative dimension of social action can be viewed as the "ontoformative" (Connell 1978) yet inherently unstable basis of a performative social reality.

These pioneering insights have given rise to a fruitful analytic tradition in sociology, anthropology, and women and gender studies that borrows the language of Butler and West and Zimmerman to analyze the ways in which gender—and by extension various social roles—is iteratively re-made in each successive performance (Bettie 2003; Connell 2010; Darwin 2018; Deutsch 2007; Jurik and Siemsen 2009; Risman 2009; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Stainback, Kliener, and Skaggs 2015). This framework has been refined and applied to performative situations outside the constitution of gender, highlighting how social categories such as class (Scharff 2008) and religion (Avishai 2006) are performatively enacted. While several scholars focus on how the pressure of normative commitments on social performances result in the persistence of inequality through the policing of boundaries (Messner 2000, Schilt and Westbrook 2009), this framework also provides us with an understanding of how the performative nature of social identities makes them radically vulnerable to change–captured in the ideas of 'undoing' and 'redoing' (Butler 2004; Darwin 2018; Deutsch 2007; Stainback, Kliener, and Skaggs 2015). Thus, a performative act not only summons a collective representation—that of 'woman' or 'middle-class'—it is also the vector by which these ideals come to change in both practice and depiction.

We can thus understand performative legitimacy in this framework to operate through the concepts of *recognition* and *legibility*. It is through the performative embodiment of norms—as they are understood in their particular environment—that people come to qualify as "recognizably human" (Butler 2004:2). Those same norms also furnish the ground by which social identities are open to contestation, reinterpretation, and thus change. In their later writings on performance and assembly, Butler underscores the importance of "acting in concert" in order to generate an "embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of

reigning notions of the political" (2015:9). By performing publicly, gatherings of individuals create the bedrock by which new interpretations of social identities and experiences can be fashioned. From this perspective, we would expect evangelical women's ability to change what is recognized as a legible performance of a 'good Christian woman' to happen through minute and diffuse challenges to a normative social order that gradually comes to adapt itself to the lived realities of individuals inhabiting particularly gendered subject positions.

While this interpretation of performance provides a crucial foundation for theorizing possibilities of agency in the interstices of the political order, its diffuse and incremental nature makes it difficult to understand the relationship between the performative nature of social identity and the emergence of organizational power. We can clearly see the mechanism by which a group of social actors can 're-do' the boundaries of interpretation for a given identity through embodied performances. Yet the emergent social realities this generates are always, to some extent, disruptions to existing constellations of power and authority. Such a perspective works well enough when theorizing abjection and exclusion, but its diffuse understanding of the performative act makes it unsuitable for analyzing the workings of organizations in a broader theoretical sense. How, then, do we understand the ability of social performances to *refashion* vertical relations and networked capacities *within* existing systems of interpretation and power? Does the performative openness of social identity always require a break with structural regimes to expand the regime of legibility within a particular milieu?

## Cultural Pragmatics

The perspective captured by cultural pragmatics is deeply at odds with the theoretical commitments of the gender performativity paradigm. Rather than theorizing abjection and the remaking of human legibility, this research program—deeply Durkheimian in its commitments—

seeks to provide a systematic, macro-sociological accounting of the uniquely performative dimensions of social action *within* a system of normative commitments. This perspective was first formalized in the work of Jeffrey Alexander, who takes up the task of initiating a tradition of analyzing the components of a 'good' performance (Alexander 2004, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2017; Alexander, Geisen, and Mast 2006). The cultural pragmatists posit that as societies have grown increasingly complex and differentiated, the performances of traditional social identities have been subject to increase strain and scrutiny. This opens up "new forms of organizational and cultural differentiation" that makes the elements of social performances "more than analytically identifiable: their empirical separation became institutionalized in special forms of social structure and available to common-sense-reflection in cultural life" (Alexander 2006:47). The integration of the sixfold elements of a cultural performance—background representations, scripts, social power, actors, observers, mise-en-scene—can be imagined along a continuum of success and failure. On one end, rituals serve as the most reified performances of social life while strategy appears as inauthentic, instrumental, and manipulative; an interpretation that results from a performance that fails to draw all its constituent parts together.

The respective ends of this performative spectrum correspond to different degrees of "fusion". The goal of all modern social performances is to diminish the symbolic distance between a social actor and the collective representation they invoke such that they are believed to 'fuse' with the content of their performance, thus achieving 'verisimilitude' in the eyes of the audience (Alexander 2006, 2017; McCormick 2015; Taylor 2021). Thus, the performance of social identity in the work of cultural pragmatics can best be understood as a public spectacle (Reed 2013a; Taylor 2021). It is through the uniquely theatrical effect of appearing before an audience that one's ability to fuse with a particular collective representation as a performative

achievement allows an actor access to a variety of resources, such as power (Mast 2013), solidarity (Villegas 2020), charismatic domination (Reed 2013a), or political status (Mast 2017).

Legitimacy is a fundamental element of cultural pragmatism, represented in the idea of 'verisimilitude'. In a sense, it almost does not matter what a social actor is actually *doing* so long as they can convincingly mobilize the disparate elements of a social performance such that they seem to render their practice of social activity as being a lifelike manifestation of a particular collective representation. This framework thus allows us to see the ways in which the (convincing) performance of a particular social identity—such as Bernie Sander's 'fusion' with the ascendent collective representation of populism (Taylor 2021)—allows for instances of enhanced capacity represented through gains such as fundraising, volunteer work, or votes tied to the felicity of a performance in the moment. However, this distinction between the social actor and the collective representation with which they may temporarily 'fuse' places power firmly outside the actual performative act itself. How can we understand the creation of *new* understandings of action, hierarchy, and capacity if the organizations that embody these phenomena are merely backdrops to the temporary invocation of a particular collective representation? The gender performativity paradigm would challenge us to consider the ability of individuals in socially abject subject positions to radically contest these symbolic structures. Yet if the gender performativity paradigm highlights how power emerges *outside* of dominant organizations, and cultural pragmatics views performative power as *emerging from* stable organizational contexts, we are still unable to understand the sealing together of vertical relations necessary for the *emergence of* a new organizational network in the act of performance itself.

## Project Framework

Borrowing from a similar background of philosophical pragmatism that grounds cultural pragmatics, the name of the 'project' framework is derived from a reading of agency that stands in stark opposition to the more traditional understandings of agency as a heroic capacity to act against the constraints of structure (Arendt 1958). In this intellectual tradition agency can be understood as something that is *accrued* and comes with the ability to have others pursue a vision of and for the world—a 'project'—on your behalf (Adams 1994, 1996, 2005a, 2005b; Dalton, Hitt, Certo, & Dalton 2007; Kiser 1999; Reed 2013a, 2017, 2019, 2020; Shapiro 2005[1]). It intertwines with the performative dimensions of social action in the sense that all persons have projects and action is performed in pursuit of or in some relation to them. However, pursuing projects almost always requires allies, agents, and networked capacities to stand in for the project's 'principal' or leader. Inasmuch as these capacities are dependent on the ability to *bind* others to act as 'agents' on the principal's behalf, action in the world overlaps with this more relational, distributed idea of 'agency'.

It is in the work of Julia Adams that we see a thorough attempt to marry this reading of agency with the idea of a cultural performance. She retheorizes Weber's idea of patrimonial power as a cultural system to explain how the creation of family mythologies honoring a lineage of patriarchal headship was used to render the authority of Dutch patriarchs legible as actions taken *on behalf of* the family line. In addition, this understanding of the patriarch's authority as deriving from their headship of a project served to bind their wives and children to a common understanding of the action required of them as 'agents' of the family line (Adams 2005a). This argument is extended in Adams' analysis of the early European monarchy, where she

[1] See Kiser (1999) and Shapiro (2005) for complete overviews of the development of classical agency theory and its deployment it the social sciences, respectively.

underscores how the King[2] as a father-ruler was an ongoing performative achievement of masculine authority that served to naturalize the agency-relations of early modern Europe (Adams 2005b). Furthermore, Adams' semiotic reading of the King-as-signified and the throne's incumbent as the self-as-signifier underscores the impossibility of perfectly merging with the 'totem' of a particular identity. While this holds true for any person, this 'totemic gap' between individual and interpretation is deepened for people whose positionality renders them as unnatural occupants of the role they hold, a phenomenon Adams' highlights with the case of Elizabeth I as a female monarch of England (Adams 2005b: esp. 245-6).

In order to fully explicate the ways in which social performances are *binding* acts, we must turn to the work of Isaac Ariail Reed. In his recent book *Power in Modernity* (2020), he draws on Julia Adams' theoretical developments in agency theory to formalize the "totemic" distance between position and occupant—between a 'king' as an actual person and a 'King' as a performance of male authority—by renaming the positions of principal and agent into "rector"—one who is *recognized* as a project's author—and "actor"—one who acts in the world on behalf of rector. He also formalizes a third part of this relationship: the "other". Other is a category for those who lead other projects, are excluded from the projects rector and actor engage in, or are only marginally or adversely incorporated into them. The deployment of this new theoretical language accounts for the multiplicity of projects that persons find themselves drawn into or on the outside of; the very rendering of persons into rectors, actors, and others is an effort by individuals and groups to cast the unpredictability and complexity of the world nameable and manageable (Reed 2020).

[2] I follow the conventions of scholarship on medieval political thought. Capital-K 'King' represents the collective representation of sovereignty while 'king' refers to the actual person.

We can thus understand how the invocation of an overarching project—that of securing familial authority (Adams 2005a, 2005b) or the power of the early American Republic (Reed 2019)—can provide legitimacy for the performance of a particular set of actions in the world. However, this framework moves beyond the idea of legitimation to incorporate a reading of authority that *binds* the actions of those who are incorporated into a hierarchy of delegation. The performative utterances of Elizabeth I when rallying her soldiers to repel the invasion of the Spanish Armada by claiming that despite the fact she had "the body of a weak and feeble woman" she was nevertheless in possession of "the heart and stomach of a king" (Adams 2005b:245) highlights the ability of rector's performance—the monarch's speech of masculine authority—to bind the action of actors—English soldiers—against a foreign other—the Duke of Parma. The success of cultural performances can have the effect of naturalizing social relations and enabling power in the moment, as well as solving various agency problems that then serve as a framework by which capacity and hierarchy can be routinized across time and human physicality by virtue of the interpretation of action as within a project (Reed 2017, 2019, 2020). It is through this performative hermeneutic that allies and enemies, leaders and followers are all incorporated into a sociohistorical cosmology of violence, power, and authority.

Binding authority based in interpretations of overarching projects helps us to understand, first, the importance of (mis)recognition of an actor or group's discretion allows for the accrual of power and, second, centers the mobilization of pre-existing networks of meaning, people, and resources across time and space. This is distinct from cultural pragmatics in the sense that—rather than viewing organizational capacity as being an external factor of the felicity of a cultural performance—the performance is itself a power act. Furthermore, the emphasis on the contextualized *interpretations* of performance does not limit the presence of hierarchical

relations and enhanced capacity to hegemonic normative frameworks, as was the case with the gender performativity framework. Rather, we can understand the networked capacities of marginalized social identities to extend beyond the emergence of new legible possibilities for recognition.

However, this framework has little to say on the ways in which a performative refashioning of the social world can be undertaken through the interpretation of action as spectacular in its very conventionality. In its realist-Weberian focus on state formation, sovereignty, and elites, this theoretical framework primarily centers the recognition of performance as an exceptional and spectacular redefinition of the project itself. The American state, in this sense, *became* an almost entirely new entity—a benevolent Leviathan capable of weathering rebellion without resorting to authoritarian measures—through the attribution of *exceptional* action to its 'agents' (Reed 2019). Such a focus is in danger of eliding the ways in which the performative refashioning of capacity and domination can be accomplished through the very *dramatization of orthodox action itself*. How might we understand, then, the inherent drama of performative action when it is directed not towards the emergence of new interpretations of action, but against them? In what ways do performances of *order* and *stability* allow for a refashioning of social life through the emergence of new projects dedicated to the very idea of conservation? Finally, how does the misrecognition of rectors—not as having enhanced discretion, as Reed (2020) would predict—but as having radically *limited* discretion allow for the achievement of hierarchy and domination? This critique of the project framework—which is, in actuality, an extension more than anything—can be partially addressed by a reconsideration of the more Foucauldian readings of performance and power that echoes insight present in the gender performativity framework.

## THEORETICAL REFRAMING: THE CASE OF DEVOUT WOMEN

Much of the scholarship on women in orthodox communities is focused on the issue of their agency (Avishai 2016; Burke 2012).[3] Initially, this was based on a reading of heroic agency that sought to understand how devout women could exercise autonomous self-determination in the face of oppressive patriarchal power-relations (Arthur 1998; Bartkowski and Read 2003; Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Brink and Mencher 1997; Chong 2006; Gerami and Lehnerer 2001; Hartman 2007; Kandiyoti 1988; Stacey 1990; Stacey and Gerard 1990). However, the definitive breakthrough in this tradition came with the work of Saba Mahmood (2005). Her ethnographic account of the mosque movement in Egypt highlights the variable ways in which Islamic women were able to achieve agentive self-authorship through their engagement with the ethical regime of fundamentalist Islam—a particular understanding of what a pious woman *should* be—in order to become devout subjects in submission before God (Mahmood 2005). As Mahmood highlights:

> "If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being… agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (2005: 14-15).

For Mahmood, we can understand submission to a *regime of authority*—that is, the norms of proper female piety—as constituting how the women of the mosque movement have agency. Their embodiment of a pious religious subject enables them to variably access social capacity normally barred from them in the form of *da'iya*: one who practices *da'wa*.[4] While religious

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[3] See Avishai (2016) and Burke (2012) for comprehensive reviews of the literature on devout women's agency.
[4] *Da'wa* is a "Quranic concept associated with God's call to… humanity to believe in the 'true religion', Islam" (Mahmood 2005:57). While it is imagined in Quranic texts as directed towards those outside the Islamic world,

doctrine bars women from teaching men—the Quran states men are the guardians of women and thus women should not occupy significant positions of leadership over them—women in the mosque movement have increasingly been able to inhabit a subject position normally denied them (Mahmood 2005). We can thus see how Mahmood's work can *actually* be read as an extension of the project framework. The particular ways that Islamic women navigate constraint allows them to undertake new forms of social action interpreted as legitimate expressions of the overarching project of ensuring piety through *da'wa*.[5] In this sense, we can understand how the very performance of a 'traditional' element of religious piety paradoxically allowed the women of the mosque movement to engage in expanded repertoires of action that were, thematically, 'normal'.

## Doing Religion

The 'doing religion' framework combines the insights of Mahmood's book with the perspective of the gender performativity paradigm to examine the complex processes by which gender and religion are mutually constitutive categories which are created and operate in certain historical and cultural contexts (Avishai 2008; Avishai 2016; Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo 2015; Bracke 2003; Burke 2012; Darwin 2018; Kupari 2016; Nyhagen 2019; Rinaldo 2014). In this reading, devout women are understood as deeply committed to observing the doctrines of their religious communities as an integral part of their self-authorship. However, the variable and contested ways in which they realize this through practice underscores what it means to agentively author—to 'do'—an authentic pious subjectivity (Avishai 2008; Avishai, Jafar, and Rinaldo

Mahmood highlights how, in practice, it is used as a way to chide one's peers for a perceived lack of piety. This is also used as a label for the female religious teachers in the mosque movement.

[5] I want to note here that I do not intend to conflate the Islamic doctrine of male guardianship with the evangelical Protestant doctrine of wifely submission. Despite this, certain parallels can be drawn between the two, most notably in the stratification of women's subject position in relation to men.

2015; Rindaldo 2014). More recently, there has been a growing strand of literature on the overlap of religion, gender, and queerness that highlights the ways in which 'un/re-doing' gender simultaneously 'un/re-does' religion (Darwin 2018; Legerski and Harker 2017; Moon and Tobin 2018). Through the performative enactment of a particularly gendered subjectivity, a social identity—such as 'devout parishioner'— is simultaneously acted into being and reconfigured in new ways (Darwin 2018, 2020).

I contend that we can read these authors as revealing how Mahmood's ideas of pious agency are *performatively* enacted; the women in the mosque movement who achieved the social capacity of religious teacher were 'un/re-doing' religion in a way that simultaneously 'un/re-did' the hierarchy of gender relations in their orthodox community. While important to temper diffuse Foucauldian readings of power with an understanding of hierarchy and authority—a move that will be made momentarily—the benefit of this addition is in the particular ways performance is able to expand the acceptable limits of action through the very *refashioning* of existing interpretations of social identity.

How, then, do orthodox performances of stability and order allow for the creation of organizations? An offshoot of the scholarship on devout women highlights how the idiosyncrasies between religious doctrine and practice amongst orthodox communities is not only tolerated but, in some instances, encouraged as a part of an ongoing cultural project to maintain a community's orthodox identity (Brophy 2016; Marti 2019a, 2019b). These authors highlight the importance of temporality in how religious action is interpreted—it is why, for example, evangelical protestants flock to Donald Trump despite his multiple divorces, lack of scriptural knowledge, and halfhearted performance of Christian ritual. Evangelical Protestants interpret Trump's political activity as "religiously legitimate primarily because he engages in

*actions* in support of religiously defined group interests" (Marti 2019a: 2). Trump is thus understood as acting on behalf of the cultural project of evangelical Protestantism and securing the possibility of an orthodox evangelical identity in the future (Marti 2019a, 2019b).

However, this reading of projects is incomplete. Returning to Adams (2005b) and Reed (2020), we can see that the religious projects of orthodox communities are not only a hermeneutic of temporal orientation, but are themselves the very hermeneutic glue by which the privileges, constraints, and delegation of action for oneself and those with whom one is in relation are sealed together. Thus—returning to Mahmood's work—we can understand how Islamic women can be seen as rectoring a project—to become accepted as religious leaders in the Mosque movement—while simultaneously being understood as an actor on behalf of the broader project of maintaining Islamic piety—represented by the label *da'iya* and the doctrinal constraints on who these women can teach. This "double hermeneutic" (Reed 2020) highlights how people are always developing folk theories of who is rector, actor, or other in a particular project. This interpretive process points to an as-yet untheorized dimension for cultural performances. Pious women in Mahmood's work are not able to access enhanced capacity and discretion by performing their 'exceptional' status *vis-à-vis* other Muslim women. Rather, the felicity of their performance was in the very (mis)recognition of these women's action as itself *bound by norms of proper female piety*. Through displays of adhering to norms and dominant interpretations, the pious women of the mosque movement were able to *performatively refashion* the interpretation of action to include new activity such as Quranic teaching and religious advising that would otherwise be understood as transgressions of the very norms—and through them, the project—that these women sought to uphold.

This proposed project, then, seeks to formalize the link between the performative refashioning of existing cultural interpretations and the ability of performances to bind agents to common projects across time, space, and human physicality. By examining the performances of 'good Christian woman' that underpinned Beverly LaHaye's ability to build Concerned Women for America I will be able to understand the specific ways in which a performative refashioning of the norms of action that accompanied the interpretation of a project allow for the building of the hierarchical domination and enhanced capacity that accompanied the creation of a national-scale political organization. The next section of this proposal will detail the logic of case selection, data collection, and analysis that will bring this undertaking into being.

## CASE SELECTION

The case that will serve as the centerpiece of this project will be Beverly LaHaye's formation of the national political advocacy group, Concerned Women for America. LaHaye was selected for two primary reasons. First, in contrast to her contemporary and sometimes rival, Phyllis Schlafly, LaHaye was much more explicitly embedded in and committed to the social identity of 'good Christian woman' as it was understood by evangelical Protestants in the late 1970's and early 1980's (Boyer 2008; Johnson 2019; Ingersoll 2003; Schreiber 2008). Where the Eagle Forum drew its membership from an eclectic swathe of white American women—Schlafly herself was a Harvard trained lawyer—CWA was always, first and foremost, an organization based in and directed towards Evangelical women homemakers (Critchlow 2006; Johnson 2019; Ingersoll 2003). Second, LaHaye was an active figure in the evangelical subculture before founding CWA. Along with her husband, Tim LaHaye—himself a prominent pastor and author of the eschatological evangelical novel series *Left Behind*—Beverly LaHaye authored numerous self-help books, memoirs, novels, and polemics that saw wide circulation amongst her peers (Heller

2002, 2016; Johnson 2019). In this way, we can understand the emergence of LaHaye's organizational project in the context of performances of Evangelical womanhood that helped to refashion the interpretations of social action required for CWA's existence.

METHODS

Historical sociological methods allow us to step out of the welter of the everyday to look at the *longue durée* of social life by incorporating the role of time into our understanding of social phenomenon (Aminzade 1992; Reyes 2019). This perspective allows us to assume an analytic stance through which we can see events of interest as part of on-going dynamics of change embedded in a temporal flow of action (Abrams 1982; Aminzade 1992; Griffin 1992; Mahoney 2000; Sewell 1996; Isaac 1997[6]). Utilizing archival data will allow me to understand texts as they are authored by social actors that are necessarily conditioned by relationships of power, meaning and, most importantly, the authority of projects bind action (Go 2008; Reed 2011, 2017; Reyes 2019). A historical approach is important for this project as it will allow me to see how evangelical women's performative rendering of their social action results in the possibilities and constraints accrued by the organizational structure of CWA.

I will use a mixture of primary and secondary sources to trace the performative dimension that allowed for CWA to emerge as an organizational project. I will focus primarily on generating a study design that focuses on thick description of a single case in order to center the particular narrative arc of meaning-making present amongst Evangelical women as they entered the political arena (Abbott 1992; Griffin 1995). This approach focuses on a processual understanding of events as they unfold throughout a narrative that is "manifold, sequential, and cumulative" (Abrams 1982). Rather than understanding prior action and choices as determining

[6] For a review of historical sociological methods on time, narrative, and causality, see Isaac (1997)

future options, I will focus on the ways in which prior events both constrain and enable particular types of action (Quadagno and Knapp 1992). Through this, I will be able to trace broad thematics of action across the various performances of evangelical womanhood within CWA.

## Data Collection

The first part of data collection will be based on archival research. I will start by accessing the monthly inter-organizational newsletters distributed in CWA between the years of the organization's founding, 1978, through the first 5 years of its operation as well as various pamphlets, posters, and notecards compiled from that same time. These archival materials are available for in-person access at the University of Kansas Spencer Research Library. This library is home to the Wilcox special collection of contemporary political movements, which is one of the largest assortments of American left- and right-wing political literature in the country (Kenneth Spencer Research Library Website 2022). These newsletters will allow me to track the growth and expansion of the organization while simultaneously highlighting the internal performance of interpretation at specific temporal moments (Reyes 2019).

In addition to archival data, I will use two books published by Beverly LaHaye as cultural objects that can provide a window into the performances LaHaye was able to disseminate to a wider evangelical literary public. The first book, *The Spirit Controlled Woman*, is regarded as a classic self-help text in the evangelical subculture. Authored alongside her husband, this book served to establish LaHaye as a prominent figure in the evangelical cultural landscape nearly half a decade before the founding of CWA (Johnson 2019). Evangelical self-help books offer firm guidance for navigating biblical imperatives in modern life and combine cultural narratives with prescriptions for action through an authoritative voice on what women 'should' do in order to be closer to God's divine plan (Heller 2002; Johnson 2019). Furthermore, these books can be seen

as containing frameworks for interpreting action and events, in a sense providing the subject position through which one might enter a broader cultural project (Netterlund 2017). Thus, we can view this text as a part of the cultural performance that set the stage for LaHaye's refashioning of social action amongst evangelical women.

The second book—*Who but a Woman?*— was written by Beverly LaHaye as the origin story of CWA's founding. This book serves as LaHaye's performative account of the impetus, justification, strategy, and narrative path by which CWA was created. Published six years following CWA's establishment, this book is much more explicitly political than her previous self-help writing, including direct arguments against a wide variety of social ills such as feminism, secular humanism, and the erosion of traditional family values. This book also includes prescriptions for action for evangelical women, though, rather than ending with the typical altar call, this book concludes with an injunction for women to participate in political action as part of their devotion to God. Taken with the previous book, I will be able to analyze the specific ways in which recounting of past performances allow for the constructions of particular frames of interpretation for social action.

The impact of these two books will be assessed using the Christian News Services' "National Religious Bestsellers" (NRB) lists during the 2 years following their publication dates: 1976-1978 and 1984-1986, respectively. Following Heller (2002), this will allow me to assess the reach and recognition of each book in one of the most comprehensive lists of evangelical book sales currently available. I will then utilize secondary historical literature detailing evangelical writings on femininity, marriage, and family life in the 1970s and 1980s in order to contextualize both of these books in broader trends of evangelical media and culture in their respective decades of publication. Finally, I will utilize secondary literature comprised of

historical texts detailing the rise of the religious right, evangelical women's political organizations, and the American political context of the 1970's and 1980's more broadly. These books will provide detailed understandings of the background context against which CWA emerged.

I also intend to build a working archive of articles published by Concerned Women for America between 1996 and 1999 and digitized on their website in 2003. While no longer available on the current CWA webpage, these articles can be accessed by utilizing the Internet Archive 'Wayback Machine': a publicly accessible service that can recreate old versions of webpages and allows users to access content that has been deleted or removed. This range of articles was selected for three reasons. First, 1996 marks the oldest articles made publicly available on the CWA webpage. Following Reed (2019), we can understand news articles and media in general as a "stage for public performance" that sets the conditions for interpretation of action by a group or organization. Second, selecting articles from the 1990's allows for us to track the continuity and change in the textual performances of CWA in the decades following its founding, yet before the massive changes that rocked American political culture in the early 2000s. Finally, 1998 and 1999 mark the impeachment of Democratic President Bill Clinton over his alleged infidelity, perjury, and abuse of power, an issue that saw concerted attention from the broader Religious Right, offering an opportunity to see the interpretive frames developed by the women of CWA deployed in new contexts (CWA Website 2022). Taken alongside the books authored by Beverly LaHaye, this working archive will provide a valuable insight into the change over time of performances within CWA.

This method follows the approach to internet-archival work pioneered by Lyn Spillman in her study *Solidarity in Strategy* (2012). Spillman highlights that internet information searches

are designed more for idiosyncratic customization rather than systematic overviews; as such, it is important to follow three steps when collecting data from a webpage: 1) the collection of all documents available from a website's homepage 2) the collection of all documents available from first-order documents 3) then all documents available from second-order webpages (Spillman 2012). In this way, I will be able to access rich evidence of public language about the political actions of CWA as they are transmitted to a broader audience.

### Data Analysis

Coding for both qualitative and historical data will be conducted using the research software Dedoose. This platform will allow for an efficient organization and coding of field notes, interview transcripts, and online archival documents (Drisko 2004). I will undertake an abductive analysis of these general codes which will then be organized into emergent themes across archival data and cultural objects such as LaHaye's books (Tavory and Timmermans 2020). My analysis will start with the development of index codes based on my extensions to the theoretical insights from the project framework. These index codes will be sorted into themes that will be used to generate working theories to explain any exceptions to my framework present in the data (Deterding and Waters 2018). The goal of my coding will be to elucidate evangelical women's interpretation of political action as CWA coalesced as a national organization.

Once coding is complete, I will analyze my data using a narrative approach (Mahoney 1999, 2003). This narrative approach will emphasize the ways in which the performances of an orthodox identity amongst evangelical women in the formation of CWA were generated by chronological sequences of events unique to this particular case. Highlighting continuity will allow me to see the path dependency in how these performances and their interpretations developed over time (Abbot 1992; Aminzade 1992; Go 2008; Griffin 1992; Mahoney 2000). To

conduct a narrative analysis, I will start by building an analytic framework of causality. Following Mahoney (2004), I will start with a generalist cultural approach that locates the causal agent in the collectivity of evangelical conservative political culture from which CWA emerged. Next, I will identify the specific semiotic codes—that is, the "systems of meaning and practices in which they are embedded" (Steinmetz 1997)—that serve as the causal mechanism by which this particular narrative unfolds. To bring this generalist framework down from the heights of abstraction, I will focus on temporal sequences of performances that have been captured or translated to a written format. This will allow me to determine the role played by specific performance acts in shaping the form and content of action and its interpretation in Concerned Women for America.

The first temporal point will be the interpretations of social actors and actions presented by Beverly LaHaye in her earliest book, *The Spirit Controlled Woman.* This book will serve as the starting point from which we can understand a narrative analysis to unfold. The meanings present in LaHaye's first book will—alongside the action it prescribes—function as a *snapshot* of the semiotic systems of evangelical women's subculture. The change, presence, and/or absence in these meanings in early CWA organizational newsletters as well as LaHaye's later book *Who but a Woman?* will be analyzed in order to understand the dynamic relationship between specific interpretations and the action constrained and enabled by them across time. Finally, I will analyze online news articles from 18 to 20 years after the organization's founding in order to understand a narrative end point by which the semiotic changes to evangelical women's political culture unfolded in the emergence of CWA.

In order to construct this narrative arc, I will undertake a process of focused coding that will allow for a thematic categorization of data and, ultimately, an organized platform for the

construction of meaning (Williams and Moser 2019; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Based on this, I will be able to approach these texts through a content analysis at the thematic level that will allow me understand the broader systems of meaning an interpretation of performances that are being invoked in each book (William and Moser 2019). Following my general thematic coding, I will then incorporate my analysis of secondary historical literature on Evangelical women's media from the 1970's and 1980's in order to assess the context of these thematic meanings in the broader subculture. This multi-directional approach to the semiotic systems represented in these texts as well as in its surrounding cultural milieu will allow me to not only see the place of these representations in the specific performances captured by these texts, but also assess and evaluate the interpenetration of representations between text and the broader movement.

These shifting dynamics of meaning will be captured through a series of written memos following each of the temporal points highlighted above that will serve to generate 'working narratives' that put my findings in dialogue with existing literature (Deterding and Waters 2018; Gerson and Damaske 2020). These memos will be collected into a final write-up that will allow me to draw conclusions on how the women in CWA understand the broader project in which they act, how their action within that project shapes and is shaped by their interpretation, and how this relationship has developed throughout recent American history.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the ways in which cultural performances allow for the refashioning of existing interpretations of social action will be an important extension in a generative research program. The binding together of multiple actors to a common project across time and human physicality does not only occur through instances of exception or at the soaring heights of state sovereignty; rather, we must understand how the (mis)recognition of social actor's *lack* of discretion can be

generative of enhanced capacity and hierarchical domination. This proposed project utilizes historical methods to analyze the formation of Concerned Women for America. Relying on primary source data such as archival material as well as online articles and mass-media books, this proposed project will have implications for our understanding of the performance of political culture as operative through thematics of order and stability.

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