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“You Try to Control Me”: Yearning, Separation, and Protest in Teenage Male Spirituality

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You try to control me / Yea, nothing you are in my eyes / You try to control me / Well, I'll spit on your rules and burn your morals / What do you think we are? / Your pet or your clay? / We will not be modeled, and we cannot be you / We will not be modeled, and we will not be you / Burn the ground. Burn the standard / Burn the ground. Burn the standard / You try to reach me / Well I've been you, and I know the lie it is / You thought there was something here? / There's no world outside of this.

Spirituality, isolation, desire and commitment all intertwine and get tangled together in the years of adolescence. The words of the inscription above point to this untidy web. I have a recording of my fifteen-year-old voice screaming these words, part of my teenage garage band's four-song demo tape. More than a decade and a half later, hearing myself evokes feelings of curiosity, tinged with embarrassment. What is the source and target of such anger? Who is that unnamed “you” of the song's boisterous address? Late in seminary, in a pastoral care class on confession and forgiveness, I revisited this song in a final paper, tracing the “you” of the song to

the silences and anxiety in the household of my teenage years. This, coupled with the incessant

bullying that I experienced in high school, which at the time of this song's writing had reached a violent enough level to make me change schools in the middle of the year, were clear sources of my teenage anger and song writing. In the paper, I concluded that as a teenager, I wrongly thought the song's "you" signified something amorphously political, the system, the man, the state, because I did not have conscious access to my feelings surrounding the song's true address, my home and my school.

However, today I am less sure. Now, I am more inclined to follow my teenage inclinations, or at least to take them into account when analyzing this remnant left by my adolescent self. If the political motivations of my teenage lyrics were simply a façade of repressed early and ongoing traumas, who is to say that the political leanings and analysis of my work today as a pastoral theologian are not simply a more sophisticated veneer? I can trace a line between the early political leanings of my teenage self and the political and spiritual commitments I hold today, more nuanced and informed perhaps, but still seeking to address a systemic and transcendent "you" (or perhaps an "us"). Yet I also cannot discard the experiences of my youth that engendered the anger I hear in my young voice, the anxieties and tensions within my boyhood home and school that I confessed and confronted in that paper many years ago. So, the challenge in hearing this vestige left by my teenage self is to maneuver between its nascent politics and the psychodynamics underlying it, projecting it forward. How do I stay attentive to both what this boy was saying as well as what he was experiencing, his politics and his life? At the same time, how do I do this without either artificially separating their clear connections, the ways politics and protest necessarily draw on life and experience, or again collapsing the former into the latter?

I use this autobiographical conundrum as the starting point of this article, because it illustrates the ways psychologically significant experiences and political leanings collide and separate in early teenage identity and spirituality. I employ the term spirituality here in the sense that Robert C. Dykstra, Allan Hugh Cole Jr., and Donald Capps use it when outlining the spirituality of young male adolescents, as a sense of vigor and excitement often stemming from the negative experiences of loss, loneliness, and rebellion in our formative years.¹ To this definition, I add that this vigorous spirituality is further a sense of yearning for wholeness, dating back to our earliest separations, yet seeking connection anew, even as we develop through social trends and identities that are defined by their distance and rigidity.

Broadly, I argue here that teenage spirituality is both political and psychologically personal. It originates in early experiences that are often outside of the adolescent's own consciousness, but this personal spirituality is also *really* political, meaning that it is created by, responding to, and addressing cultural trends and systems of power. Further, I argue that these two sides of adolescent spirituality are also intimately connected. The yearning for connection that characterizes teenage spirituality originates in our earliest separations, guided by cultural and gendered patterns, which leave a longing for connection in the midst of separation. However, this yearning is also often frustrated by the identities available to adolescents, which especially for boys are defined more by distance and loneliness than connection. It is precisely through this frustrated longing that the teenager will search for something new, beginning a political quest. The very systems that, as in my case, the teenager screams to "burn" are therefore, at least in part, also those that spur the psychological dynamics that impel our yearning and frustration

¹ See Robert C. Dykstra, Allan Hugh Cole Jr., & Donald Capps, *Losers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 6-7.

forward. Spirituality is itself then both a product of and response to culture. It is deeply personal and political.

Specifically, my focus here is male adolescent spirituality, a function of the psychoautobiographical origin of this article. Though I believe it holds implications for adolescent rebellion in general and I seek to attend to specific feminist and African American voices that inform my analysis, I also note that the dynamics examined here span from my experiences as a teenager recognized and socialized as a white male, an overtly privileged location in our society. I explore in the first half of the article the cultural and psychological dynamics underlying male adolescent spirituality from a psychoanalytic perspective. Aligning the dynamics of male gender development by feminist analysts Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin with more recent work on male spirituality by Donald Capps, I note how the traumatic maternal separation key to male identity development is both expanded and subverted by male spirituality. Specifically, the love of God as substitute for early, idealized object relations subverts the separation from these objects, as this love can lead to a spiritualized reunion. At the same time, this reunion also sanctions male separation and domination by providing a limited outlet for an expression of this yearning, mitigating the separation and allowing the infant to assume a male gender identity by identifying with the father. Thus, in its formation, male spirituality is both a way of subverting male identity as well as a way of conforming to it. This spirituality allows us to accept our isolation precisely at the same time that it yearns and seeks for connection.

This formative spirituality then carries over into male adolescence. In the second half of the article, I connect the tropes of male adolescence with the spirituality of early development, noting how teenage identity development must maneuver between masculine tropes that solidify one's early separation, while the very excitement and vigor that is the spirituality of youth

expresses a yearning that seeks reunion and wholeness. Focusing primarily on the work of pastoral theologians Allan Hugh Cole Jr. and Robert Dykstra, I argue that the combination of spiritual yearning and cultural isolation are not, however, a simple dichotomy. Rather, this spirituality is expressed through the tropes of masculinity, seeking wholeness precisely within isolating masculine identities. However, tensions between this desire and the avenues of identity available may also erupt into emergent political and spiritual commitments, often expressed in anger. Thus, spirituality is deeply personal and political, formed by culturally delineated early separations but expressing a yearning for difference and change. I conclude by addressing this argument to pastoral care providers, those most responsive to adolescent spirituality. If teenage spirituality is both personal and political, we must learn to hear and take seriously both the experiences *and* the politics of our youth, mapping their overlap but not collapsing the latter into the former to the extent that their political message is never heard. Rather, we must listen to the angry cries of youth for a yearning for wholeness and a critique of our own boundaries.

I. Tracing the Origins of Male Spirituality: Separations and Yearnings

The size and scope of this article do not permit me to explore contemporary debates of spirituality in depth. As noted above, I am aligning my use of the term here with that of Dykstra, Cole, and Capps. However, more recently social scientists, most notably Courtney Bender, Winifred Fallers Sullivan, and Wendy Cadge, have argued that the use and definition of spirituality is fostered and shaped by the institutional settings in which it appears.² These authors

² See Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Winifred Fallers Sullivan, *Prison Religion: Faith-Based Reform and the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); *Journal of Childhood and Religion* Volume 6, Issue 1 (March 2015) ©Sopher Press (contact jcr@sopherpress.com)

argue that because spirituality tends to evade precise definition, we must map how the term is employed in a given setting in order to see how broader cultural and political dynamics shape what we understand as our spirituality. As Bender contends, “we must approach spirituality and ‘the spiritual’ in America as deeply entangled within various religious and secular histories, social structures, and cultural practices.”³ This situating of the spiritual, however, does not exclude the definition by Dykstra, Cole, and Capps of the sense of vigor and excitement of boyhood often spanning from negative experiences, though this recent work does ask that we situate boyhood spirituality more overtly in the political realm, amongst trends and relations of power. We must look at spirituality’s creation and adaptation within the cultural structures and regulations that govern it, while still allowing room to recognize its plurality and fluidity.⁴ Thus, I keep to a psychological understanding of spirituality here, as a force that drives children and youth, often but not necessarily expressed symbolically in religious terms.⁵ However, I am also

Chicago Press, 2014); Wendy Cadge, *Paging God: Religion in the Halls of Medicine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

³ Bender, 183.

⁴ This understanding of male spirituality echoes the work of psychoanalyst Ken Corbett on boyhood masculinities. In theorizing the adoption of masculinity by children, Corbett writes that analysis must attend “regulatory cultural practices as opposed to structural myths, and work as well toward a less determined theorization of masculinity.” By “structural myths,” Corbett is referring to the un-historical presumption of a universal Oedipal crisis in much of psychoanalytic literature. Ken Corbett, *Boyhoods: Rethinking Masculinities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 51.

⁵ By focusing squarely to the psychological dimension of spirituality, I do not mean to exclude or discredit theological dimensions of the soul’s connection with its creator. My singular focus on psychology is meant only to narrow the parameters of article.

theory, a boy infant is understood to turn his sexual drives towards his mother as an early and idealized object of pleasure. However, this creates what is known as the Oedipal crisis when the boy feels threatened by his father as a rival for the mother's love, leading him eventually to give up the mother and identify with the father as a man. Melancholia is then the introjection or internalization of a lost object into the unconscious when the object's loss cannot be properly grieved, often because of the traumatic level of the loss and the ambivalent feelings originally held toward the object.⁹ Capps notes that a son's loss of the mother as loved and trusted object following the Oedipal crisis often results in a condition of melancholy, because of the level of trauma and ambivalence associated with the loss of "the mother he had originally experienced."¹⁰ In the crisis, the boy also feels the Oedipal mother turning against him, revealing that she is not the idealized mother of the boy's psychic fantasy. She distances herself from the male child, such that the image of the purely beloved mother is lost, resulting in a condition of melancholy, because the high level of trauma and ambivalence following this loss prevents the boy from properly grieving the lost mother.¹¹ Such a melancholic loss leads the boy to internalize the idealized mother into his very self, resulting in despondency coupled with self-berating. The boy turns the negative feelings he holds towards his mother onto himself, because he has internalized

in this work in his discussion of Christianity as a substitute for the mother, as recounted below.

⁹ See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Phillip Reiff, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Collier Books, 1963). Originally published in 1917.

¹⁰ Donald Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia: James, Otto, Jung and Erikson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 4.

¹¹ Capps, *Men and their Religion*, 32-36.

her into himself. Yet Capps theorizes that this loss further creates an unspoken longing within the son, one often expressed as a spiritual search, an endless yearning, pulling the son symbolically into the realms of religion.

Before moving deeper into Capps's psychology of men's spirituality, I supplement his narrative here with those of psychoanalytic feminism, because these accounts highlight a facet present but less of a central focus for Capps: the rigidity of gender tropes that bring about a boy's original separation from the mother. Like Capps, Nancy Chodorow's analysis assumes that a child born with a penis and recognized as male will be treated as different and separate from the mother, lessening the intensity and the duration of the bond between the two when compared to that of girls.¹² However, more than Capps, Chodorow underscores the fact that this differential treatment is the result of differing, gendered ego boundaries underlying the sexist separation of labor in the home. This difference from Capps is in part because Chodorow's work is more in line with the object relations school of D. W. Winnicott, which stresses the role of pre-Oedipal bonding and merger with the mother in ego development,¹³ whereas Capps remains closer to Freudian theory in these works, with its emphasis on libidinal drives during and after the Oedipal crisis.¹⁴ Yet Chodorow is also seeking a psychoanalytic account of men's disidentification from

¹² Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 96-99.

¹³ See D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Originally published in 1971.

¹⁴ However, this is not true for the entirety of Donald Capps's work in the psychology of religion. For example, he examines the utility of self psychology for our understanding of the depleted self and a theology of shame in *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

the mothering role, which she identifies with the rigid ego boundaries associated with men and masculinity.

According to Chodorow, though such boundaries remain unformed for a baby boy, the mother projects them onto him, negating fusion or identification between the two and marking him as other: “Sons tend to be experienced as differentiated from their mothers, and mothers push this differentiation.”¹⁵ Chodorow is assuming that fathers will be absent or secondary to the mother’s primary caretaking role. Therefore, she theorizes that a child develops as a boy precisely through an incomplete merger with his primary caretaker due the mother’s presumption that he is different from her and similar to the absent father. Boys must identify more with the role of the absent male father than an actual person, with “cultural images of masculinity and men chosen as masculine models.”¹⁶ The boy develops more through his relationship with absence rather than internalizing a relational and porous ego structure via a relationship. As a result, the male child’s ego is formed into the very same rigid ego boundaries that were projected onto him. The masculinity that the boy adopts is one of distance rather than union, rigidity rather than the fluidity that defines human relationships. Further, because the boy never forms a relational identity, he will disidentify with the mothering role as he grows to be a man. Thus, the model of the absent and lonely father is repeated through the generations via gendered roles and images, which regulate how we treat our babies and thus whom our babies become.

Jessica Benjamin assumes much of the same developmental narrative as Chodorow; however, I turn to her here because her work explains the role of power and dominance in the

¹⁵ Chodorow, 110.

¹⁶ Ibid., 176.

formation of rigid male ego boundaries. In theorizing the origin of men's dominating rather than relational character, Benjamin focuses on Winnicott's theory of object destruction.¹⁷ According to Winnicott, in order for a child to break the merger and become an independent self, she or he must destroy the merged object internally. This means that the child releases the idealized object from her or his imagined omnipotent control over it, which is characteristic of the merger, and becomes ready to meet the person in reality: "This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object."¹⁸ For Winnicott, this recognition is only possible if the object survives the destruction, meaning that the mother remains beside the child in the outside world, ready for an actual relationship past the merger. Benjamin expands upon this theory in light of gender differences and development. She notes that because the merger between mother and son is never fully formed, as outlined above, the son's ego is formed by extreme disidentification with the mother and thus the parenting role. The coupling of weak merger with the extremity of the son's subsequent rejection of the mothering role results in an outcome where the son is unable to recognize his mother after his psychic destruction of her: "The need to sever the identification with the other in order to be confirmed both as a separate person and as a male person...often prevents the boy from recognizing his mother. She is not seen as an independent person (another subject), but as something other – as nature, as an instrument or object, as less than human."¹⁹ Thus, through this psychic destruction of his primary caregiver, the son identifies

¹⁷ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

¹⁸ Winnicott, 126.

¹⁹ Benjamin, 76.

his developing masculinity with a dominating role. He learns to relate by expressing his distance and power over others. The boy will come to identify with the father, but as with Chodorow, Benjamin assumes the father's absence from the home as the primary wage earner. The father is absent, yet his role and value remain a potent symbol within the home.²⁰ As such, "the little boy's identificatory love for his father is the psychological foundation of the idealization of male power and the autonomous individuality."²¹ For Benjamin, the boy comes to identify with a role of power and domination rather than mutuality. Further, Benjamin contends that this masculinity characterized by distance and domination is at the root of the Western notion of the individual subject, legally and intellectually separate from others and from nature, is able to cast a differentiated and objective eye on anything external to the self.

Chodorow's and Benjamin's narratives of masculine identity development are now decades old. As noted above, both assume in these works a single or at least dominant and absent male wage earner within the context of a heterosexual marriage. This family model, however, has become increasingly rare today as family and working structures become more fluid and plural.²² Further, in critiquing white feminist theory, bell hooks has argued that the nuclear family assumed in much of feminist critique has omitted family structures prevalent for African

²⁰ Benjamin notes that this symbol is internalized psychically as the phallus, thus echoing Jacques Lacan's innovations in casting the Oedipus complex into the realm of semiotics. See "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007). Originally published in 1966. See Benjamin, 123-125.

²¹ Benjamin, 107.

²² Judith Butler questions the implications of Chodorow's models when applied to collectives of gay-identified youth in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 181-185. Originally published in 1993.

Americans. In contrast to the isolated nuclear family and thus the isolated mother, hooks notes that African American families have tended to take a more communal approach to child rearing.²³ Moreover, hooks argues that within African American families, fathers have taken a larger role in parenting, as single family incomes remain elusive to black men in the face of racist educational, hiring, and promotional trends.²⁴ Thus, today's family structures and the routes to masculine identity development are far more varied than originally recognized and described by Chodorow and Benjamin.

However, as historian and sociologist Michael Kimmel has catalogued thoroughly, the "hegemonic masculinity" of distance and domination continues to exercise a regulating and normative role in male identity formation.²⁵ Not all men develop through the parental patterns of the absent father and isolated mother. Reality is far more varied and fluid than the static image of the traditional household. Nonetheless, the image of a masculinity defined by its distance and domination lingers in our culture, and thus its influence remains, even after the structures that formed and solidified it in the home have weakened. Even in the recognized diversity of

²³ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: South End, 2000), 133-147.

²⁴ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8-9.

²⁵ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4. Christie Cozad Neuger, "Men's Issues in the Local Church: What Clergymen Have to Say." In *The Care of Men*, eds. Christie Cozad Neuger and James Poling (Nashville, Abingdon, 1997) specifically examines the ongoing negotiations of men with hegemonic models through a qualitative study of male pastoral caregivers in church settings. Moreover, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "How Sexuality and Relationships have Revolutionized Pastoral Theology." In *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, eds. James Woodward and Steven Pattison (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000) looks at the continuing relevance of Chodorow's models in understanding gendered forms of relationships and spirituality.

households and communities of today, the power of normative images continue to hold influence in how we treat our children. These images become a constant conversation partner with our own ideals and images, even when parents are consciously seeking to contend against stereotypical gender roles.²⁶ In this way, the continuing impact of hegemonic masculinity remains a friction between boys and their primary caregivers. It seeps into our projections, continuing patterns of loss and rigidity in male identity formation.

Thus, distance from the mother remains a formative yet traumatic experience for boys, one that is both the result of and the catalyst for domination and loneliness within masculine identities. However, as noted above, Capps writes that spirituality is often employed in a compensatory way for men suffering melancholy for their mothers. Capps actually outlines three basic forms of spirituality: honor, hope, and humor. The first is aligned with attempts to be a “better boy” to regain the lost object, and the last allows a sense of irony that makes for a looser hold on the melancholic object.²⁷ However, in relation to adolescent spirituality and development, Capps’s characterization of hope is most pertinent, because it expresses the continued longing and search for connection well after the separation from the mother. According to Capps, “religion offers an alternative (i.e., symbolic) means of expressing and entertaining desires that were formerly invested in the boy’s mother, and these desires are

²⁶ Writing more recently about boyhood and masculinity from a psychoanalytic perspective, Ken Corbett explains, “My clinical curiosity moves me to try to understand how children and families narrate the stories they collectively tell in order to account for their relations, and their overwhelming desires and losses...I listen closely for the ways in which children and families position their stories in relation to dominant cultural narratives.” Corbett, 12.

²⁷ Capps, *Men and their Religion*, 44-45, 52-53. Capps expands upon the religion of humor in *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

reflected in men's tendency, as James E. Dittes puts it, to be 'driven by hope.'"²⁸ As I argue in the second half of this article, it is precisely a spirituality bent towards hope that expresses a boy's longing for connection and wholeness, when often only fragmentary and distanced masculine identities are predominant.

For Capps, spirituality expresses a longing for symbolic reunion with the original, idealized object following the maternal separation key to masculine identity development. He notes that in Freud's formulation, libidinal drives originally strive to take both the mother and father as objects, but love for the father is immediately barred for boys through the homosexuality taboo, which as psychoanalytic writers have noted, is primary even over the incest taboo.²⁹ Yet, according to Capps, religion, especially Christianity, offers a compensation for the loss of the mother through a spiritual reunion with the father. Capps writes concerning specifically Christian faith, "religion offers a compromise: In exchange for its demand that the boy give up much of his object-choice of his mother and intensify his identification with his father, religion provides means by which a boy may continue to give expression to his longing

²⁸ Capps, *Men and their Religion*, 49. In fact, Dittes originally located men's hope precisely in a longing for wholeness in the face of the fragmented relationships characteristic of men. For Dittes, drivenness is the original expression of men's spirituality, formed as it is in "the inevitable wound" of separation from the mother, the distance that leaves men's spirituality in a state of fragmentation and longing. James E. Dittes, *Driven by Hope: Men and Meaning* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 25. See above note 8 for my discussion of Capps's use of the terms religion and spirituality.

²⁹ See Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960). Originally published in 1923. The homosexual taboo has been greatly expanded in conversation with Freud's original formulations by Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy of Sex.'" In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975). See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 85-89. Originally published in 1990.

for – his object-choice of – his father.”³⁰ In other words, following the loss of the mother, the father, in spiritualized form, works as a substitute. Spiritual yearning connects to a different early object, a compensation for the lost primary object, the mother. Thus, Capps points to Erik Erikson’s noted phrase, “‘Father religions have mother churches.’”³¹ The spirituality of yearning for wholeness following maternal separation may actually bring men to religion, even patriarchal religion as a substitute.

Yet even as compensation, religion offers more of an outlet for spiritual yearning than complete satisfaction. Male spirituality remains as the desire for a relational self denied in traditional and privileged male identities as formulated by Chodorow and Benjamin. In this way, spirituality channeled through religion undercuts the rigid boundaries projected onto the male child because it allows the boy to continue to feel connected.³² However, this connection is also ambiguous, for according to Capps, it also provides only a minimal, confined outlet for such desire, which in turn creates room for a boy’s acceptance of masculine norms and separation. First, this spiritual outlet is closely guarded and confined by the super-ego, as Capps goes on to explain in his work with Christianity.³³ The super-ego is the part of the psyche that internalizes the rules and roles of society following the Oedipal crisis. Via identification with the separate

³⁰ Donald Capps, *Men and their Religion*, 79.

³¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton), 263. Quoted in Donald Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, 1.

³² As Capps writes in another work, in hope, “one ‘feels related’ to the other even when she is absent.” *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 46. Originally published in 1995.

³³ See Donald Capps, *Men and their Religion*, 81-83.

and isolated father, this super-ego guards and punishes any expression of desire for connection in a boy. Spiritual yearning is thus constantly monitored and also condemned by the super-ego, cast aside to the periphery of the psyche, often expressed more as a confession than desire. Because it must continually be monitored and repressed, this longing continues unsatisfied, even in the compensations of religion.

Further, this spiritualized compensation for one's lost primary objects lessens the intensity of this loss, and thus the trauma and ambivalence of the loss is less severe. As Capps explains in work with Christianity, "It provided an outlet for the indirect expression of longing for one's father, and by providing this release, it inhibited a revengeful attitude toward one's father and assisted in the consolidation of masculinity through the intensification of identification with father and father's world."³⁴ Because one can express some love for the father on a spiritual level, one is less inclined to hate the father following the Oedipal crisis, allowing the boy also to identify with the father. In this way, even as this spiritual yearning is a boy's subversion of the separation from his primary objects, it also mitigates the blow. Feeling less ambivalence or rage towards the father because of the consolations of religion, the boy moves to adopt the privileged masculine identity that fostered the loss of the mother in the first place. When it comes to early separation and masculine identity formation, spirituality is thus both subversion and a means towards conformity.

In her work *The Psychic Life of Power*, theorist Judith Butler writes that "the desire to desire is a willingness to desire precisely that which would foreclose desire, if only for the

³⁴ Ibid., 85.

possibility of continuing to desire.”³⁵ In other words, the need for attachment will make the self grab ahold of even that which prohibits and subordinates it. Our desire to be able to desire means that we will yearn for, or rather channel and assemble our yearning through, systems and regimes that prohibit or draw boundaries around our desires. Thus is male spirituality. Male identity is, of course, an overwhelmingly privileged social marker, a dominating privilege whose benefits far outweigh its costs, to the disadvantage of all of patriarchy’s others. However, its cost, as outlined above, is a distance, loneliness, and rigidity characteristic of male identity. These characteristics are not essential to men, nor are they assumed by all men in the same way, though in our culture they remain powerful symbols that continue to hold a disciplining influence on our lives. Male spirituality is a by-product of this influence. It is given to us through the regulatory norms that make for incomplete early relationships. If boys only experience the necessary psychic merger with their mothers primarily by its lack, then their spiritual longing for connection is fostered in the incompleteness of our primary attachments. This spiritual yearning is like a vestige, a remnant, a taste left on the tongue for a thing that was teased. We thus cling to it, even as it further solidifies the separation it pushes against.

II. Distance, Yearning, and the Ambiguity of Male Adolescent Spirituality

If hegemonic masculinities somehow still rub in frictions between young boys and their primary caregivers, through the plurality of ways masculine identity takes shape today, then once a boy becomes a young adolescent, he is confronted anew by hegemonic identities and characters

³⁵ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 61.

in the formation of his own boyhood. This was true in my own life. As a quiet, anxious, bookish yet also unconventional young white male, deeply influenced by the grunge culture of the mid-90s, with my long, red-dyed hair and earring, I stood out starkly from much of the rural, Southern small town of my early teenage years. I was punished for standing out; I was subjected to discipline through my peers, home, and school, made to feel outcast, threatened, disappointing. It was as if I had chosen the wrong form of masculinity, or rather, that the form I had become was one that played the target for other more dominant masculinities in that context. Boys in various settings confront gendered regulations in a number of different ways, but nonetheless this confrontation is inevitable as boys grow through various forms of masculinity, always in conversation with the dominant, distanced, and rigid models outlined above.

A boy is then faced with gendered avenues that further the separation and isolation key to early masculine identity development, yet his spiritual yearning for greater connection will also continue to search anew, even as the boy develops in conversation with and within these distancing masculinities. As noted above, Dykstra, Cole, and Capps relate the spirituality of teenage boys to a sense of vigor and excitement often catalyzed by negative experiences of loss, loneliness, and rebellion, “the anvil on which their sense of themselves...will be forged.”³⁶ According to these authors, each of these experiences hold certain possibilities either for self-denial or spiritual wholeness and transcendence, and each author relates the negative experiences he writes about and its possible negative outcomes with a boy’s confrontation with stultifying yet dominant models of masculinity.³⁷ Rather than working with one single experience, however, in

³⁶ Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, *Losers, Loners, and Rebels*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-39, 80-83, 133-139.

this section I trace the spiritual nature in the formation of adolescent identity as a dialogue with masculine tropes. My emphasis in this section is on the works of Allan Hugh Cole Jr. and Robert Dykstra, because both of these authors stress the lingering isolation within male identity formation, an isolation that I argue continues even in male friendship. This focus underlines the link between spirituality as the yearning for connection and the constant influence of masculine identities and patterns that create distance.

My argument, however, is that there is not a simple dichotomy between spirituality on the one hand and distancing masculinity on the other. Rather, I argue that spirituality works in and through these masculinities, expressing a yearning for wholeness even *within* and *through* distancing identities. This contrast between our unconscious desires and the tropes available for boys then amplifies the energy, excitement, and vigor that characterize the spirituality of boys. It is then this energy fostered within this contrast that can then pull a boy towards political commitments, such as those glimpsed in my lyrics above.

A. Loneliness, Projections, and Spirituality in Adolescent Male Identity Development

Growing into masculinities influenced by cultural norms means that boys often grow into identities that further solidify the separation from their primary objects and thus from all others. This assumption of distance and isolation is not just surrender to external pressure, but rather it is the development of the self through the only or the most prominent routes available in the limited landscape of masculinities in our culture. Cole writes of the loneliness that is characteristic of boys who grow to be men due to social expectations: “Boys have needs similar to girls when it comes to acceptance, affirmation, support, encouragement, and being recognized for who they are and for what they deem important. Even so, boys’ struggles typically go unnoticed, and if

noticed, they tend to be minimized if not dismissed. This leads a boy to feel frustrated, sad, anxious, and lonely.”³⁸ It is as if only a certain masculine form or a limited set of characteristics can be recognized in our culture, those characterized by distance and isolation. If the separation from the mother came from the projection of rigid ego boundaries onto the baby recognized as male, then this projection continues on into boyhood. We are recognized and hence formed in distance and rigidity.

Moreover, in adolescence this projection is not simply benign or innocent. These projections become enforced, often accompanied with threats of harm and punishment. Continuing in a second work on boyhood spirituality, Cole writes: “A boy also recognizes that failure to meet these expectations, especially those tied closest to what these significant others say that boyhood and manhood require...leads to criticism, punishment, and even humiliation.”³⁹ This is the discipline of boyhood, the enforcement of norms through violence. In this way, a distanced form of masculinity functions as protection for an adolescent. The masculinity of adolescence thus forms a seal on the early and formative separations of childhood. Confronted with models of distance and loneliness, a boy is formed continuing along the path away from his early relations.

The enforcement of masculinity is compounded when matched with racial discrimination. Pastoral theologian Gregory C. Ellison II notes that African American young men must also contend with the racist stereotypes of culture that confine black masculinity through

³⁸ Ibid., 93.

³⁹ Robert C. Dykstra, Allan Hugh Cole Jr., & Donald Capps, *The Faith and Friendships of Teenage Boys* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 13.

oversimplified images. The hyper-visible images of black men as criminals, athletes, or entertainers “further [perpetuate] the silencing and exclusion of the masses of African American young men,” because these rigid and racist stereotypes are the only forms of black masculinity recognized by the wider culture.⁴⁰ In a culture where whiteness is an invisible norm, race is often only visible in black persons. This means that African American males are not only recognized as males but as black males, which amplifies the projections cast onto them. Moreover, the lens of racist recognition works not only in projections and visibility for African American teenagers, but also it participates in the promotion of disadvantageous educational and hiring tracks for black men. In a society where isolation and then competition are the gage of manhood, black males are often blocked off into the losing end of this competition.⁴¹ As bell hooks explains, these projections work not only to isolate black males, but also to keep them out of relationships and communal involvement working towards liberative ends: “The invitation to participate in competitive money-making capitalist work, when made by the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal state, enticed masses of black folk, calling them away from the resistance struggle for liberation.”⁴² Thus, patriarchy and racism collude to create models of masculinity for African American teenagers that promote distance and oppression rather than cooperation in the

⁴⁰ Gregory C. Ellison II, *Cut Dead but Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), xiv, 12-14. Ellison’s depiction of hyper-visible, racist images rendering the personhood of African American persons invisible echoes Kelly Brown Douglas’ work on stereotypes of black sexuality in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 56-59.

⁴¹ For an overview of quantitative studies of these trends as well as their effects on African American health, see Donald A. Barr, *Health Disparities in the United States: Social Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Health*. 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 115-144.

⁴² hooks, *We Real Cool*, 17.

struggle for liberation. Individuality among black male adolescents is rendered silent or invisible, or in Ellison's Jamesian phrase "cut dead," through cultural blindness regulating recognizable models of black masculinity.⁴³

Cole notes, however, that while the loneliness of male adolescence threatens isolation, it can also cultivate what he calls "solitude," the "penchant for welcoming being alone and appreciating what it offers," including space for creativity, differentiation, and thus meaningful relationships.⁴⁴ This is the positive possibility of isolation, one that may not end entirely in loneliness. Robert Dykstra also underlines the promise of solitude for adolescents in his *Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture*. For Dykstra, the isolation of youth is a necessary phase that brings one out of conformity and into relationship with one's own depth: "It is the adolescent's vocation to experience a kind of isolation in order to figure out who he is, who she is, to find out of what one's body and soul are capable, but to find much more than this as well: to find hope, fire, passion, love, community, and maybe, if one is lucky, the very Self of God."⁴⁵ The goal of solitude in adolescence is to discover one's complexity, to move through the false selves of compliance in order to discover one's own compassion, vocation, and spirit.⁴⁶ Dykstra further contends that it is in the discovery of oneself that a youth will also discover God, will connect to

⁴³ Ellison, 1-3.

⁴⁴ Dykstra, Cole, and Capps, *Losers, Loners, and Rebels*, 101.

⁴⁵ Robert C. Dykstra, "Out of One's Depths: Finding Faith on the Fringe," 9. Lecture presented at the annual *Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture* at Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003. Accessed January 8, 2015, <http://www.ptsem.edu/lectures/>.

⁴⁶ Robert C. Dykstra, "Out of One's Depths: Seeking Soul in Solitude," 15. Lecture presented at the annual *Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture* at Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003. Accessed January 8, 2015, <http://www.ptsem.edu/lectures/>.

a transcendent wholeness outside of his present fragmentation.⁴⁷ Cole and Dykstra thus agree with the possibilities of solitude. The isolation characteristic of male adolescence need not end only in loneliness.

Cole and Dykstra's contrast between isolation and solitude points precisely to the link between the yearning that is adolescent spirituality and the limitation of the tropes available to boys. Though isolation holds the promises of solitude, individuation emphasized over against communal or porous relationality continues to be the singular or dominant route of male identity. The spirituality of boys can thus bring isolation to a more holistic end, yet nonetheless isolation and individuality remain the only or primary routes to this end. Boyhood spirituality can only express its yearning and move towards wholeness within and through the tropes of loneliness. It is as if a boy must first complete his fundamental separation from others before becoming able to reenter the world of relationships. Thus, isolated male identities and boyhood spirituality as yearning for connection intertwine. The yearning for connection must work through isolation because that is the avenue available to it. As such, spirituality must pull against itself, following deeper into isolation, pushing forward in the hope of eventual relationships via individuation. Moreover, as I argue in the following section, this isolation continues, as well as spirituality's vital protest within and against it, even in the realm of teenage male friendship.

B. Isolation and Spirituality in Male Adolescent Friendship

⁴⁷ In his first published book *Counseling Troubled Youth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), Robert C. Dykstra examines the "eschatological self" of teenagers, the unexpected in-breaking of one's ultimate fullness into the fragmentation of the present.

Both Cole and Dykstra hold out possibilities for male adolescent friendships as a way of navigating the isolation of boyhood towards individuation and wholeness. Cole relates that the pressures examined above threaten boys to such an extent that navigating them without a close friend becomes extremely precarious:

Such loneliness reaches its peak in early adolescence, when a kid's need for nurture, affirmation, and support becomes profound, and also when, particularly in the case of boys, a kid becomes increasingly aware of the difficult, if not impossible, cultural norms he is expected to meet. Precisely because that need for relationship with a trusted peer, best friend, or chum *is* so powerful at that age, when the need goes unmet a kid feels intense loneliness and disconnection... When that relationship does not develop adequately, or is otherwise impaired, the boy experiences a great deal of pain and insecurity.⁴⁸

So the stakes of boyhood friendship are high. It becomes a single thread in the tropes of masculinity that allows for continuing connection, even in the isolation described above. Without it, the boy is threatened with complete loneliness.

Yet there is also loneliness and distance *within* adolescent male friendships. I think of the band mates who played beside me as I screamed against the pressures of home and school during my teenage years. Yes, there was connection there, especially in the music that we created. There was a mutual desire to scream, to make noise, to beat against our drums and guitar strings together, in mutual protest and self-expression. There was solidarity and companionship there. Yet, in recollecting that mutual energy, I feel I also need to strain into the depths of my memory and imagination to touch upon that unspoken solidarity. Rather, what was more often on the surface and spoken in our band practices and our time together was not overt solidarity or love. It was much more ambiguous than that, more interspersed with put downs, violence, and displays

⁴⁸ Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, *Losers, Loners, and Rebels*, 106.

of dominance. Being the youngest and smallest member of our group, I remember often feeling threatened and humiliated among my friends, feeling like I was not as cool as the others, and that I never really measured up.

Of course, I cannot generalize my experience to encapsulate all others. I will not confine all male adolescent friendships with such pessimism. Yet the dominance and isolation prevalent in masculine tropes nonetheless exerts power in the realm of adolescent friendships. Dykstra notes the strength of such norms in mitigating the possibilities of adolescent friendship. If boyhood is defined by separation and isolation, then male adolescent friendship too must be characterized by its hesitancy toward overt connection: “For most boys and men, the very sense of wanting or needing a friend is precisely the problem. The desire for a friend, though oddly familiar at the far reaches of their conscious experience, *is* weird or effeminate to them...it is felt as a threat to their sense of masculine self-sufficiency.”⁴⁹ This does not mean that male friendships are impossible, but it does mean that they often exist in a felt tension, with a need to pull away, even as the spirituality of boys yearns for greater connection.

To illustrate his point, Dykstra quotes dialogue between two young friends from a young adult novel by Sherman Alexie as an example of the subtle ways adolescent boys must work through cultural tropes even when expressing their desires:

“I thought you were on suspension, dickwad,” [Rowdy] said, which was [his] way of saying, “I’m happy you’re here.” “Kiss my ass,” I said. I wanted to tell him that he was my best friend and I loved him like crazy, but boys don’t say such things to other boys, and *nobody* said such things to Rowdy. “Can I tell you a secret?” I asked. “It better not be girly,” he said. “It’s not.” “Okay, then, tell me.” “I’m transferring to Reardan.” Rowdy’s eyes narrowed. His eyes always narrowed right before he beat the crap out of someone. I started shaking.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, *Faith and the Friendships of Teenage Boys*, 63.

⁵⁰ Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (New York: Little, Brown
Journal of Childhood and Religion Volume 6, Issue 1 (March 2015)
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Dykstra rightly goes on to note the subversive and spiritual quality of male adolescent friendships. Channeling Allan Ginsberg, he names such friends “curators of funny emotions with a common ear for our deep gossip,” meaning that through humor, irony, and even violence, friends also subtly express their desires and connections, within rather than outside of the tropes of distanced and dominating masculinity.⁵¹ Dykstra is therefore hesitant to recommend anything more than these subtle subversions, noting how entrenched and limited the available forms of masculinity are, even among friends.⁵² Note, for example, how the narrator of the passage above and his friend cannot speak their feelings of love and loss in this impactful moment, or rather they can speak them, but only through dominance and fear. Love and desire speak and energize these boys, but they can only be channeled through distanced and dominating forms of masculinity. This does not discredit nor dissolve such love and longing, yet it does illustrate their limitations and possibilities.

Again, there is no simple dichotomy between the spiritual yearning for connection originating in early experiences and the tropes of masculinity prevalent in male adolescence. Rather, these two, while pulling in different directions, intertwine in our youth, blending into one another, projecting each other forward. Yearning for connection is not spoken against masculine identity, but rather through and in it. In the excerpt above, Rowdy spoke his love and feelings of

& Co., 2007), 48-49. Quoted in Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, *The Faith and Friendships of Teenage Boys*, 45. Note: I have condensed this dialogue into a single paragraph to conserve space.

⁵¹ Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, *The Faith and Friendships of Teenage Boys*, 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69.

loss precisely through a threatening action.⁵³ Yet at the same time, spiritual yearning and masculine distance also constrain one another. The wholeness that spirituality longs for continues to be interrupted by the tropes of isolation and dominance prevalent in masculinity. On the other hand, the isolations of youth are not totalizing because the yearning for connection nonetheless remains, even when it is out of consciousness. In this way, spirituality continues as a conforming and subversive outlet for boys, just as it did in their infancy, as described above. Just as infant spirituality allows for a sort of connection while allowing room for one to accept the separations of masculinity – because it means hating the father’s role just a bit less – so too does adolescent spirituality subvert masculine isolation at the same time that it complies with it.

C. Protest and Commitment as Boyhood Trope and Spirituality

Yet even as they collude together, spiritual yearning for wholeness and male adolescent tropes remain in a generative tension. The force and vigor that define male adolescent spirituality can also be a product of the contrast between identities defined by their isolation and this yearning for connection. The friction that results from their opposition within a teenager’s spirit and unconscious may then go on to fuel the type of anger and protest that leads to real commitments in youth. Thus, I name the protest underlying and articulated in my song “Burn the Standard” as spiritual. It is an example of the emerging commitments of an angry and invigorated teenager, commitments both deeply personal as well as expanding outward in a political search for something new.

⁵³ I am *not* in any way excusing or condoning the violence too often associated with masculine identity. Rather, this analysis is meant as a critique of the limited outlets for spiritual yearning in masculine identities of isolation, rigidity, and dominance.

However, this anger and protest also shares in the same ambiguities as male solitude and friendship outlined above. In male teenagers, anger, protest, and the commitments they lead to are still often filtered through the tropes of masculinity, or at least stay in conversation with them throughout. Feminists and Womanists have written extensively about the need for anger as the voice and catalyst of change against oppressive patriarchal and racist systems and models, yet anger from male adolescents is more often a citation of masculine displays of power and distance than something resembling the liberative anger described by these theorists.⁵⁴ Returning to my own example, note the need to drive away connection in my lyrics, their simple and steady refusal, all coming in my recording from a forceful, amplified male voice, proclaiming independence: “You try to control me / Yea, nothing you are in my eyes / You try to control me / Well, I’ll spit on your rules and burn your morals.” My friend’s distorted electric guitar, pounding deep bar chords, the thumping of the bass, the accelerated beat of the drums all mimic metal and grunge styles that had inspired us to form a band. Such force and anger echoes that of Rowdy cited above from the Alexie novel, the need to punch because that is what boys do. This protest – and the political and spiritual commitments it was beginning to generate – is certainly spoken in conformity with dominant (and dominating) masculine models.

And yet, I cannot discount this remnant of my own personal protest, neither the force that propelled it forward nor the commitments I was beginning to form and articulate in my early

⁵⁴ Examples include Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 122-123; Evelyn L. Parker, *Trouble Don’t Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 125-145; and Theresa Snorton, “What About All those Angry Black Women?” In *Women Out of Order: Risking Change and Creating Care in a Multicultural World*, eds. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Theresa Snorton (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

years, because I still feel and hold something akin to them today. The commitments of adolescent politics and spirituality often cling to amorphous terms, proclaiming commitments to realms of transcendence and opposition to systemic injustices without much detail or clear plans of action.⁵⁵ I was never quite clear who the “you” of my lyrics signified, nor was I fully aware of how close it was tied to those immediately around my teenage self. Further, these commitments are filtered through or at least remain in conversation with reigning cultural tropes, which include hegemonic masculinity for teenage boys. Yet these realities do not deter from the profoundly personal and political implications of these commitments. Yes, the anger behind that song followed various tropes of masculinity, yet this does not exclude a sense of vigor and excitement also propelling my voice forward, a longing for connection, articulated through the models available to me. Inside this ambiguous and amorphous protest nonetheless spoke a deep yearning, one that would in fact later propel me into seminary and into graduate studies, where I continue to search and long for wholeness, in new forms of protest and politics. There are inchoate commitments and frustrations within that song that I still sing today, though I no longer feign innocence.

⁵⁵ See Parker, 29-51; Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). All of these works are based on qualitative studies of teenagers. Parker’s work is specifically looking at the spirituality of African American teenagers and its possibilities to counter racism. The other two works are based on a large-scale study known as the National Study of Youth and Religion. They both look at the dissolution of American Christianity into “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” In all three works, the authors advise a more directional approach by the institutional church in shaping the devotion of American teenagers.

Admittedly, it is perilous to generalize from my own experiences of isolation, protest, and spirituality, because I do not claim these as essential elements of boyhood. This spiritual yearning for connection is not a simple purity, the root of my/our most authentic self, the unadulterated part of me. Rather, as noted above, even this sense of spirituality is itself the product of the regimes of gender, forces that discipline communities, mothers, fathers, and sons, creating trends of distance and a longing for closeness. In examining my own experiences – ones very much defined by my own personal and family history, race and class identity, religious setting and experience, as well as countless other unique factors – I am theorizing an example of the ambiguities of forming one’s identity in dialogue with reigning masculinities. The longing, isolation, and protests of youth occur down innumerable paths of identity formation. Yet the regimes of gender and the discipline they offer continue to guide these paths, producing frictions of isolation and yearning. And this is precisely a central facet of boyhood spirituality: it is both deeply personal and political, individual yet created in and pushing against the trends and pressures that shape us.

Conclusion: Hearing the Spiritual and Political through Tropes of Anger

Male adolescent spirituality is ambiguous; it conforms to the isolating tropes of male identity with which it is constantly in dialogue, all the while longing and pushing for something more, a fuller sense of connection and wholeness. Yet within its complexities lie temptations of oversimplification for pastoral caregivers, those who are most ready to hear the spiritual yearning of the teenagers to whom they minister. For one, it is easy for the yearning and vigor of male adolescent spirituality to be oversimplified as simply one’s participation in the tropes of masculinity. This can especially be true of the protest and political commitments that I analyze at

the end of this article, because these are so often expressed in anger, which can easily be heard as expressions of distance and power linked to male identity. Caregivers might easily ignore or shrug off boisterous, angry young men as copies of dominating or chest thumping masculinities without hearing the protest or yearning channeled through these expressions. On the other hand, the yearning of spirituality can also be explained away as expressions of our fragmented relationships, often linked to early traumas and limited social settings. In other words, the political implications of the protest can be silenced under a totalizing form of psychologizing. This tendency is in fact helpful in part, because the yearning that men experience spans directly from their incomplete relationships. Yet confining this yearning solely to a person's experience fails to take into account the gendered tropes at the center of this isolation. Without hearing the political as well as the personal, simply examining experience in pastoral care can become a way of ignoring the political implications and the inchoate commitments beginning to form in adolescent spirituality.

I have attended to both of the realities of gender conformity and personal experience when describing male adolescent spirituality, though I am reticent to confine or simplify it to either of them. Rather, through both the tropes and early experiences, I hear also a deep yearning within my young voice on that recording, something propelling it forward, into the commitments and searches for wholeness and critique that I still undertake today, however imperfectly. This yearning echoes the spirituality of boys fostered in the loneliness of separation, yet it does not simply look backward. It also yells against the limited and limiting options available to my teenage self – even while this yelling itself was an option offered in my milieu – yet it does not just look around in anger. Rather, it also moves forward, looking for a connection it has yet to

experience. Let pastoral caregivers hear the inchoate political commitments of the teenagers around us, for they search for something beyond our present boundaries.

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