

THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELLED HER: THE INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES AND
CULTURAL LOGIC OF BISHOP ALMA B. WHITE

BY

Nichole Kathryn Kathol

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Committee:

Chairperson*

Date approved: _____

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The Dissertation Committee for Nichole Kathol certifies
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ABSTRACT

In a culture inhospitable to women preachers, Alma Bridwell White not only became a successful preacher, but went on to become the first female bishop in the U.S. The leader of her own religious organization, the Pillar of Fire, she simultaneously offered her proud support to the early feminist movement and the KKK. Alma White is an example of an oppressed oppressor who rhetorically maneuvers the tensions that arise amongst her various and seemingly contradictory identities. Her autobiographical work, *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire* represents a concerted effort to not only construct a culturally palatable religious identity as divinely endorsed fundamentalist, white supremacist, feminist Christian, but to use that divinity in the service of inspiring transformation of the holy spirit and steadfast devotion in followers of her organization, the Pillar of Fire. In this project, I argue that White uses a religious pattern of thought in pursuit of her goals – demonize, forebode, self deify.

DEDICATION

For Ryan, the smartest, funniest, most patient person I know;
because he loves me – contradictions and all.

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The various ways Ryan Weaver helped me in my dissertation process are too numerous to name here. Let's just say his brain, his heart and his sense of humor all deserve the equivalent of co-author credit for this project.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE NEED FOR INTERSECTIONALITY

In a culture inhospitable to women preachers, Alma Bridwell White not only became a successful preacher, but went on to become the first female bishop in the U.S. The leader of her own religious organization, the Pillar of Fire, she simultaneously offered her proud support to the early feminist movement and the KKK. Alma White is an example of an oppressed oppressor who rhetorically maneuvers the tensions that arise amongst her various and seemingly contradictory identities. Her autobiographical work, *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire* represents a concerted effort to not only construct a culturally palatable religious identity as divinely endorsed fundamentalist, white supremacist, feminist Christian, but to use that divinity in the service of inspiring transformation of the holy spirit and steadfast devotion in followers of her organization, the Pillar of Fire. In this project, I argue that White uses a religious pattern of thought in pursuit of her goals – demonize, forebode, self deify.

This chapter will explore the critical problems which necessitate this project. I will discuss the lack of scholarly attention received by Alma White as well as the limitations of the scholarship that does exist. I will explain the intersectional theoretical approach which informs my rhetorical analysis, outlining the limitations to current intersectional research and laying out my plan for a more complete approach.

Fourteen years after the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, in the midst of the American Civil War, Mollie Alma Bridwell, an individual later described as the leader of the only religious denomination to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment from its inception and responsible for keeping feminism alive between the 1920s and the 1960s, was born (Stanley,

Feminist 6). In 1901, the same year that Susan B. Anthony handed over the presidency of the National American Woman Suffrage Association to Carrie Chapman Catt, Alma White organized and headed her own religious organization, the Methodist Pentecostal Union (which later split from the Methodist church and was renamed the Pillar of Fire).¹ In 1918, while Alice Paul, Lucy Burns and other suffragists within the National Women's Party proclaimed it unnecessary to shelve their suffrage activism in favor of war work, Alma White was consecrated the first female bishop of a Christian church in the United States in a ceremony presided over by William Godbey (Stanley, *Feminist* 79; Kandt; Lindley 330).

Such accomplishments suggest Alma White might be the subject of historical accounts and her writings the artifacts for rhetorical analyses. Such a body of research does not exist, however. Instead, the academic attention she has received is comprised of one book-length biographical project (Stanley, *Feminist*), a handful of journal articles (Kandt; Stanley, "Empowered;" and Stanley, "Politics") and a passing reference in materials on Protestantism, the KKK, and women preachers (Blee; Keller, Ruether & Cantlon; Lindley; Pope-Levison; Stanley, *Holy*; Synan).

This body of work largely fails to address White's problematic legacy. For in 1922, the same year Ida B. Wells raised money to publish and distribute one thousand copies of *The Arkansas Race Riot*, Alma B. White began her legacy as the leader of "the only religious group to publicly endorse the Ku Klux Klan" (Stanley, *Feminist* 87). In the most comprehensive study of White, Stanley chronicles White's life and argues that White contributed to feminism, women's preaching, and the Wesleyan Holiness Theology. Though she does discuss White's

¹ Over a century in-the-making, the Pillar of Fire organization still exists today with congregations in New Jersey, Colorado, California and Ohio, missions in Costa Rica and India and radio stations in New York, Ohio and Colorado (Pillar of Fire). See www.pillar.org for more information.

affiliation with the KKK, calling it an “unholy alliance” (98), she claims that White’s links between Pillar of Fire and the KKK had little to do with racism and much to do with her anti-Catholic perspective. In response to charges that White is racist, Stanley argues White was merely a product of her time who expressed “a willingness to associate with African Americans,” as though such a gesture could excuse White’s nearly life-long belief in biblically-based white supremacy and very vocal support of the Klan and its principles (Stanley *Feminist* 91).

Perhaps the lack of attention to White results from what Caroline Brekus claims has prevented the formation of a rich history of female preaching: secular feminists’ preference for recuperating secular foremothers or women who preached in ways that can be squared with contemporary feminism (16). Perhaps White’s espousal of Klan ideals has discouraged modern scholars from wanting to uncover or celebrate her legacy. Maybe White’s obscurity and her vast amount of writing, which on face is often repetitive and contradictory, have discouraged historians from thorough analysis of her work. Whatever the case, charting just these few significant events in the life of Alma B. White shows she is an interesting and important example of the feminist struggle in America and her writings warrant rhetorical analysis.

Further analysis will show that she represents the complexity of early feminist struggles as they are inevitably influenced by intersectional identities--their own and those of the people they wish to influence. Just as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other white suffragists used racist ideology to advance suffragist arguments in the face of an impending 15th Amendment, Alma White used the racist ideology of the KKK to work toward her goals as a feminist, fundamentalist Christian. In this chapter I will outline the critical problems that call for expanded exploration of Alma White and her rhetoric, how scholars have analyzed her discourse,

and the benefits of approaching it from an intersectional perspective. I will also discuss how a rhetorical methodology informed by theories of intersectionality considers not just how White constructs rhetoric as a woman, or a fundamentalist Christian or a white supremacist separately, but from a variety of positions that complicate, compound and even contradict each other. In doing this I will pick up where previous research on intersectionality has often left off by focusing on an individual who simultaneously occupies positions of oppression and privilege.

Critical Problems

Despite Alma White's uniqueness and significant accomplishments, the current scholarship related to her life and rhetoric suffers from three major critical problems. First, White has received little attention. Second, those scholars who have paid attention to her have not critically assessed how her seemingly progressive rhetoric works in collusion with oppressive forces. Third, intersectionality has been theorized and applied in ways that only consider individuals in multiple positions of oppression, forgoing reflection on how positions of privilege intermingle with and influence the oppression they experience.

Lack of Attention

Alma White's life and rhetoric receive limited attention in the scholarship that more generally surveys influential American women and feminists and the scholarship that more specifically explores racism within early American feminism. For example, works which discuss feminist rhetors but fail to mention White include the following. Molly Wertheimer's *Listening to Their Voices: Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women* explores the rhetorical importance of women throughout history yet neglects White's historical or rhetorical legacy. Jane Donawerth's *Rhetorical Theory by Women before 1900* reviews the rhetorical theory of over twenty under-

researched figures but fails to consider Alma White's rhetoric of feminist preaching. Nan Johnson's *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910* explores the lives and rhetorics of women who were forced to overcome rhetorical barriers in male dominated spheres, yet fails to consider White's rhetoric as the first female bishop in a religious denomination that strictly prohibited women from preaching. Carol Mattingly's *Well Tempered Women: Nineteenth Century Temperance Rhetoric* makes no mention of Alma White's extensive rhetorical work toward prohibition. Kate Ronald and Joy Ritchie's *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric* provides coverage of more than sixty women's rhetorics, but misses all together White's rhetorical activity.

Even the scholarship that does address racism within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminist rhetoric does not include Alma White and her rhetoric. Such works include *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* where Louise Michelle Newman examines the white supremacist arguments and ideologies suffragists used to advance their cause, nevertheless missing the female leader of the only religious organization of her time to publicly support the KKK. In addition, Allison Sneider's *Suffragists in an Imperial Age: U.S. Expansion and the Woman Question, 1870-1929* explores suffragist tactics that infused the cause of suffrage with imperialism, yet speaks not of White's very public espousal of the virtues of the KKK and its imperialist attitudes. Moreover, "*Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks*": *Racism and American Feminism* by Barbara Andolsen offers explanation and examples for nativism and racism within early American feminism but overlooks the unapologetic nativism and racism of suffragist Alma White.

In short, research that focuses on historical and influential women living at the same time as White and that explores racism within early American feminism, a cause in which White was

consumed, does not discuss White. This problem of inattention to White is further compounded by the problematic approaches scholars take in the work that does exist.

Lack of Critical Attention

Scholars who have discussed Alma White have largely left unexamined the racist, religiously intolerant, and even anti-feminist elements of her rhetoric. Alma White is the sole focus in the scholarship of two individuals: Susie Cunningham Stanley and Kristin Kandt. A historical theologian, Stanley's contributions are the most comprehensive, encompassing a book-length biography, a doctoral dissertation, and several articles. Stanley's work on White is invaluable as she explores the many roles White played including feminist, fundamentalist, vegetarian, leader of Pillar of Fire, supporter of the KKK, wife, mother, business woman, advocate for Temperance, Republican, anti-Catholic, and American patriot. Her recognition of the many layers of White's identity suggests Stanley is committed to providing a nuanced depiction of White. I propose to build on Stanley's work in two main areas. I will address Stanley's apologia for White's racism and her projection of feminism onto White's life. I will then explain why Stanley adopts the positions she does.

First, Stanley argues that White allied with the Klan because she was anti-Catholic, patriotic, nativistic and against modernism, not necessarily because she was racist. In response to the question, "Why did Alma join forces with the Ku Klux Klan?" Stanley writes, "Because Alma chose to respond to the world aggressively rather than to accept the world as it was or to try to avoid the world altogether, she sought allies to assist her" (*Feminist* 87). In addition to accepting fervent anti-Catholicism as no more than an aggressive response to reality, Stanley's answer suggests that Alma's association with the KKK was somehow inevitable if she was not

going to deny the world in which she was living. This argumentative move illustrates an area where Stanley's conclusion may be broadened. Stanley notes White's anti-Catholicism but explains it away based on expediency. In this project I will provide a more complete understanding of White's rhetoric and build on Stanley's arguments by digging further into White's claims about Catholicism and the virtues of the KKK to uncover how White positions herself as a supporter of a group like the KKK, and explain why this position may have appealed to readers.

Second, Stanley constructs White's history in a way that realigns her religion, thoughts, and ideas with a feminist ideology. She claims that Alma White's life and works "actualiz[e] the feminist impulses inherent in Wesleyan Holiness theology" and "demonstrate that Christianity can play a positive role in the liberation of women" (*Feminist* 1-2). She not only argues that White's religion had inherent liberatory potential for women, but also characterizes their allegiance to God as the means for achieving this, claiming women "asserted their autonomy as they claimed their allegiance to God rather than to men" ("Empowered" 104). This maneuver needs further discussion.

One reason why Stanley might try to justify White's white supremacy, feminism and religion may stem from her own identity. Stanley adopts a religious, historical perspective, expressing her gratitude for the "Wesleyan Holiness upbringing that helped [her] understand Alma White's [a major female figure within the Wesleyan Holiness movement] religious faith" (*Feminist* xiv; see also Kandt 2). This perspective may account for why she provides what Chris Armstrong, a regular contributor to christianitytoday.com, describes as "affectionate treatment" of White (42). This, combined with her arguments that White was not racist, despite Pillar of Fire being "the only religious group to publicly endorse the Ku Klux Klan" and that White was

radically feminist when many of her stances worked against feminist values seem to suggest Stanley is attempting to vindicate White in her biography (Stanley, *Feminist* 87).

However her perspective on Alma White's life and history was shaped, one major consequence that follows from Stanley's approach is an incorrect assumption that White's white supremacy, religion, and feminism logically and inherently coalesced with her rhetoric. I am not suggesting racism and feminism have always been unlikely bedfellows or that Christianity (Wesleyan Holiness theology) and feminism are mutually exclusive. However, White's rhetoric indicates that between racism and feminism contradictions emerge and between fundamentalist evangelical Christianity and feminism (across its many definitions/derivations) marked tensions exist. It is imperative to recognize these tensions, to see them as places where identity is continually articulated and negotiated within White's rhetoric.

To amend and clarify Stanley's work and build a more complete understanding of White's history as a Christian feminist, I provide evidence which suggests Stanley's characterization of White, as radically feminist, may be inaccurate. I do this by pulling from scholarship on evangelical feminism and pointing to places where Stanley contradicts her own arguments. Clyde Wilcox, for example, in an article entitled "Feminism and Anti-Feminism among Evangelical Women," argues that for many evangelical women, Biblical scripture forms the schema from which they derive their political attitudes, constraining those women from adopting certain feminist positions (147). While it seems Alma White may have espoused certain feminist values, perhaps most apparent in her belief that women should preach, her view of feminism remained confined within her evangelical Christian beliefs because for White, "every sphere [of life] was to be navigated in the service of God" ("A Woman Bishop" 222). By this logic it appears that for Stanley the restrictions put in place by religious doctrine, even if

they limit women's agency, can be liberatory simply because they are done in the service of God rather than men. I argue that while Wesleyan Holiness theology may be liberatory in certain ways, it is simultaneously restrictive in others.

Stanley herself provides evidence illustrating White's contradiction of the value of autonomy when she admits that White expressed a clear disdain for the secular, "strongly opposed her members' involvement in secular occupations," expected Pillar of Fire members to "brea[k] with the world and ge[t] out of ungodly business entanglements," and insisted they "live in mission houses and give all their money to [POF]" (*Feminist* 67). Such stringent anti-secular requirements undoubtedly acted as restrictions on the agency of White's followers, limiting the feminist direction of her evangelical Christian theology. Yet Stanley fails to discuss them as such. For Stanley to say that Wesleyan Holiness theology is inherently feminist suggests a very limited definition of feminism. From any definition that encompasses the inherent value of choice (about family, politics, gender roles and religion for example) the evangelist stances of White's Wesleyan Holiness theology become conditionally incongruent with feminism.

Kristin Kandt, another scholar whose primary focus is Alma White, provides a less "affectionate" view, moving closer to recognizing the tensions between White's religion and feminism and more clearly exposing her racism. I will briefly explain how Kandt addresses the tensions in White's positions. I will present several places where Kandt's work might be extended, outline a possible source from which the limitations of her research stem, discuss several implications for those limitations and lay out ways in which I build on her ideas.

Kandt explores the historical and legal implications of White's legacy and argues that Alma White "both adhered to and rejected the prevailing nineteenth-century viewpoints

surrounding traditional sex roles within the Cult of True Womanhood" (755).² Kandt claims White upheld the Cult by believing that women were naturally more pious and pure than men, but fought against it by denouncing its demands that women be submissive to men and remain within the domestic sphere. Kandt views White's espousal of piety and purity for women as in tension with her feminism, calling her philosophies "contradictory and conflicting" (778). White's support for suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment stemmed from a belief that women must maintain their innate superiority to men in both piety and purity, and this, for Kandt, is inconsistent with White's claims for complete equality between the genders (755, 778).

While Kandt recognizes and challenges tensions in White's rhetoric, there are two related places where her ideas can be broadened. First, she underestimates the extent to which White's beliefs in white supremacy informed her arguments about feminism and the KKK and, second, overstates White's ability to transcend certain pillars of the cult of true womanhood.

According to Kandt, White's strong belief that women must attain voting rights and secure all those rights afforded to men is what led her to adopt a racist ideology. Kandt explains:

The primary reason Alma White advocated racism was her belief that white women, though deserving of equality, needed protection from black and other ethnic males...[she] believed that Jewish and black men, in particular, sought to ruin the purity and virtue of the white race...Therefore, she characterized the Klan's protection of white women as both benign and chivalrous, as well as absolutely necessary to maintain a segregated society. (784-785)

² For further discussion of the Cult of True Womanhood see Barbara Welter. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860, *American Quarterly*, 18, 1966: p. 151-174.

For White, suffrage and the ERA were policies that helped women defend themselves against men (both white and non-white) and maintain white supremacy. Kandt suggests that White affiliated herself with the Klan because she saw them as women's ally, and that her white supremacy followed from that affiliation. Kandt writes, "Everything [Alma White] did was with an eye towards liberating women – whether promoting suffrage or the ERA, supporting the Klan and racism, or fighting the Catholic Church and the repeal of prohibition" (794). While I do not disagree that White sought to liberate women, Kandt's statement suggests women's liberation was the driving force behind all of the simultaneous ideological battles White fought.

Evidence from White's writings clearly suggests that women's liberation was indeed one of her goals; however, it was subsumed within her goal to carry out God's righteous path for her. For White, women deserved the same rights as men, not because it was a natural right but because it was the divine right of God (*Woman's Ministry* 5). Everything Alma White did was with an eye toward scripture, for she felt it was "the only sufficient rule of faith and practice" (*New Testament* 39). As such, her ability to transcend the demands of domesticity and submissiveness, as Kandt argues she was able to do, would have been severely limited by the boundaries outlined in her own theology.

Both of Kandt's misestimations, I argue, likely stem from her inaccurate assumption that White was first and foremost concerned with women's rights. There is no doubt women's rights was a major cause for which she fought, but it is difficult to say it overshadowed her religious beliefs, both because an examination of White's life and works suggests White's religion greatly informed her belief in white supremacy and her adoption (or rejection) of the cult of true womanhood and because it is difficult to say any one of her identities always stood as *the* most important.

Characterizing one part of White's identity positions as the most important in constructing her overall identity has several negative implications. While White may have actually believed the KKK was good for women's rights, to suggest she only supported the KKK (and only then used racist arguments) because she saw them as advocates for women, not only denies White's personal autonomy by characterizing her as merely a victim of the group's persuasion, but it assumes she did not harbor any attitudes of white supremacy before affiliating with the group.

To extend the work Kandt begins by fleshing out some of the tensions within White's life and work, I will draw from White's own writing. There are places where White discusses her biblically based beliefs in white supremacy, showing she had a predisposition to racism and was not led down that path solely because of her affiliation with the KKK. I will also strive to show how at different times in her life any one of her identity positions is pushed to the forefront, taking a dominant position (though still influenced by the others) and shaping her rhetorical construction of self. In doing this I attempt to address the intersectional identities in tandem with each other rather than as an additive list of categories that impact one another within a static hierarchy. The limitations Kandt exhibits in her research are both interrogated and perpetuated in other research on White.

Authors of histories and anthologies more general in scope have looked into White's life and works. The most extensive is Kathleen Blee's *Women of the Klan*. Her coverage of Alma White falls within the larger context of racism and gender in the 1920s, offering a reflexive and critical look at her legacy. Though constructive, Blee's work is limited in its ability to unearth in depth the complexities of White's life and works simply because this is not its primary focus.

Blee argues that White's life history “exemplifies a common process whereby women integrated...seemingly disparate political ideologies” (72). She offers a more critical treatment of White than Stanley, while still stressing the importance of studying a figure like White in terms of how she represents a recurrent dynamic. In her work on the women of the Klan, Blee lays out the multiple interwoven ideological, political and sociological paths that brought women into the WKKK, a group made up of women affiliated with the KKK who sought to take on more leadership roles within the Klan, a group of which Alma White was a part. Blee writes: “the women’s Klan of the 1920s was not only a way to promote racist, intolerant, and xenophobic policies but also a social setting in which to enjoy their own racial and religious privileges” (1). By illuminating the narrative of the WKKK, she exposes the racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, sexist, and intolerant views not only within the KKK but along the multiple paths women took to the KKK: temperance, evangelism, electoral politics and suffrage (all causes for which White was active). She underscores the idea that racism did not originate in the KKK. Rather, the Klan organized and consolidated preexisting racist and xenophobic attitudes into a structured political force (157). This approach alone makes Blee’s work valuable because it demonstrates the sort of intersectional analysis needed when exploring rhetoric like that of Alma White.

Not until recently have scholars taken on the task of revealing and accounting for problematic positions of racism, for example, within movements like suffrage, evangelism and temperance. Such a trend needs to continue as it has implications for understanding the complex and multiple histories of feminism. Further, it highlights the importance of simultaneous reflection on privilege and oppression within feminist analysis, a critical stance I intend to employ in my analysis of White’s life and works.

Unfortunately, Blee's critical practices have not been adopted by other scholars who discuss Alma White. I will briefly outline each of these works individually, pointing to the specific problems that exist. I will discuss more generally the possible foundation from which all of the problems of these works likely stems. I will describe the overall implications for the problems and also provide my plan for addressing these implications.

Susan Hill Lindley, in *"You Have Stept Out of Your Place" A History of Women and Religion in America*, offers a collection of historical essays exploring the ways women have stretched the boundaries of their religious roles. Her attempt to articulate what the recovery of women's past has suggested reveals her view that men are the individuals who effectuate what she terms the "negatives," or "the infuriating, outrageous, sometimes ridiculous things some men have said about women's nature and roles...cultural pressures and restrictions" (ix). This view as well as the view that sees the women she anthologizes as either challenging or accepting subordination frame her overall perspective for the book. Her either/or categorization also seems to present similar problems for her in her writing focused specifically on White. Lindley claims White was clearly a "radical feminist," citing her desire for religious, social, economic and political equality, her support for suffrage, and her endorsement for the National Woman's party as evidence (331). She fails to cite White's beliefs about women's natural purity and natural roles as mothers and wives, beliefs not radically feminist in character. Further, like Stanley, Lindley suggests that White's concern for women, her anti-modernism, her patriotism, and her anti-Catholicism led her to support the Klan, as though she did not have preexisting beliefs of biblically based white superiority (331).

Lindley eludes more complex reflection because of her desire to place the women in her anthology in two groups: those who "stepped out of their culturally assigned subordination" and

those who “appeared to accept subordinate or separate spheres” (x). Such an either/or categorization denies the likelihood that women can do both and eliminates the possibility for understanding the ways many of the women in her book likely engaged in both resistance and compliance with patriarchal forces within the religious territories they occupied. Perhaps Lindley’s desire to view women in her research as either complying with or resisting “the negatives” guided her in the direction of overlooking White’s compliance with the racist forces at work within an organization like the KKK.

Her work could be developed further to reflect upon the ways women often work in collusion with what she calls the negatives. To do this I would turn to work like Kathleen Blee’s research on the WKKK which suggests it is unlikely that White’s affiliation with the Klan resulted in a racist ideology. Instead it is just as likely that her racist ideology led her to affiliate herself with the Klan. Lindley’s scholarship offers a welcome exploration of women who are often understudied and overlooked. However, overall it seems her aim toward rigid categorization is at odds with the type of intersectional analysis I wish to advocate, that which views the simultaneous privilege *and* oppression, compliance *and* resistance of a subject as essential to its analytical success.

White’s experiences of privilege and oppression continue to escape critical attention in a work that, like Lindley’s, enters the discussion of White through the larger context of female religious figures in America. In *Turn the Pulpit Loose: Two Centuries of American Women Evangelists*, Priscilla Pope-Levison profiles Alma White, providing primary materials from her autobiographical works to support her largely biographical account of White’s life. In an explanation of the many responsibilities and activities in which White participated, she writes, “[Alma] also found opportunities to support the Ku Klux Klan during the height of its popularity

in the 1920s. She concurred with the Klan's anti-Catholic and anti-immigration sentiments (138-139). This description of White's affiliation with the Klan, however brief, seems not only to suggest this alliance was just a run of the mill addition to White's already existing list of affiliations, but that her reasons for joining were isolated to anti-Catholicism and anti-immigration.

While Pope-Levison's employment of White's own words offers a unique approach because it allows for White to speak on her own terms, simply anthologizing her work and providing a rather small amount of contextual information affords Pope-Levison little room for reflection and analysis of White's rhetorical maneuvers, including the tensions within White's rhetoric.

To expand Pope Levison's work, I propose to turn to White's own words and the work of several scholars already mentioned to take issue with two of Pope-Levison's suggestions: that White's role as a white supremacist fits neatly within her other identities and that her white supremacy followed from her affiliation with the KKK instead of the reverse. These tensions must be examined to permit an analysis of White's rhetoric that recognizes the intersectionality of oppression and privilege.

From this review of literature it has likely become apparent that the majority of scholarship on Alma B. White neglects the task of critical reflection upon her simultaneous compliance with and resistance to the most consistently dominant oppressive structures in her life of race, gender and religion. This trend is not unique to scholarship on White; it impacts the larger body of scholarship that discusses woman suffrage and first wave feminist rhetoric. Though one would be hard pressed to effectively argue that a rhetorical tradition of suffrage

which glosses over the racism inherent within much of the rhetoric is either complete or accurate, this does not mean that scholars who study woman suffrage rhetoric have discussed racism. For example, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's well known *Man Cannot Speak For Her Vols.1&2.*, described by Elizabeth Tasker and Frances Holt-Underwood as a "seminal work" which brought about "a breakthrough in feminist historic methodology" (57), neglects to address the use of racist arguments used by many of the suffragist rhetors including Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Francis Willard. Not until relatively recently have black feminist scholars begun the process of uncovering this aspect of suffrage heritage.³ It is a problem that within the research on first wave feminist rhetoric little critical attention has been paid to the dark side of woman's rights rhetoric. It is not that the history of racism within suffrage rhetoric is necessarily denied, but it is often left out of the discussion when considering the rhetorical import of suffragist discourse. The causes for such omission likely vary across scholar, discipline and time.

Perhaps this situation has arisen because it is easier for scholars to champion the rhetorical work of suffragists without muddling through some of the ugliness – the racist arguments veiled as those based on expediency, arguments relying on evolutionist discourses which promote white supremacy, arguments pulled from civilizing rationales that portray non-white peoples as barbaric. It could be that scholars feel they might disparage the invaluable work suffragists did toward achieving gender equality in the United States if they expose racist, nativist, or xenophobic tendencies within their rhetoric. It may also stem from the belief that

³ See Angela Davis. *Women, Race and Class*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc. ,1981; bell hooks. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. "Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment" in L. Scharf & J. Jensen (Eds.) *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement 1920-1940*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press: 261-278, 1983.

some of the racist arguments were merely a means to an end. While all of these may or may not be true in any one case, the omission of discussions of racism (sexism, religious intolerance) has undeniable, problematic, and lasting consequences.

If rhetorical critics who are invested in the study of history, rhetoric and feminism neglect such critical processes, however difficult, they limit their ability to see the historical, rhetorical and feminist significance (both constructive and destructive) of the rhetoric. Also, there are significant consequences of not discussing racism or, more broadly, the places where progressive rhetorics oppress, not the least of which is that racism will be perpetuated if it is not revealed and challenged. Further, the repeated avoidance of discussing racism in studies of suffrage rhetoric eventually leaves such discussions up to those individuals who find themselves current victims of the same sort of racist discourses. Audre Lorde argues “Traditionally in American society it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor” (114). As a feminist rhetorical scholar one should be concerned that no transformative potential is offered by this pedagogical dynamic. Lorde argues that this situation acts as “a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought” (113).

While it is not the responsibility of every scholar to focus on issues of racism, it is important that we understand how racist ideas infiltrated suffrage rhetoric and the rhetorical situation in which they emerged. It is important for scholars to employ in their analyses the critical processes of revealing racism in suffrage rhetoric both familiar and newly discovered, which is why this project will address both the need to discuss Alma White and her rhetoric, as well as critically engage her simultaneously progressive and oppressive discourses. This strategy is an effort to extend critical processes that other scholars have avoided when looking at suffrage

rhetoric to those figures who are newly uncovered as important to women's rights struggles and who fell into similar problematic discourses, figures like Alma White.

Intersectional Identity Scholarship

The third and final critical problem I address in this project involves the theory and method with which I will explore Alma White's rhetoric. As stated above, this project attempts to account for but not dismiss the tensions within White's rhetoric. I do this in an effort to foster ongoing discussions about how individuals can perform roles as oppressed oppressors. To embark on such a discussion, the theory of intersectionality, as initially discussed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, will be important. I will discuss intersectionality theory, point to problematic places where the theory can be extended, outline what I believe to be potential causes for the problems within this research, offer significant consequences following from the causes/problems and explain how my project will attempt to extend this research.

The theory and method of intersectionality is most clearly articulated by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Crenshaw argues that the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of oppressions one experiences. Thus any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which individuals are subordinated ("Demarginalizing" 315). Theorists such as Crenshaw, Audre Lorde and Patricia Hill Collins have interrogated notions of oppression as universally experienced and so their work functions well for exploring Alma White's intersectional rhetoric. While I agree with and strive to create this same sort of interrogation, and so am taking an intersectional rhetorical approach in my work, I believe my project can extend the use of intersectionality to engage rhetorics located in the intersections of both privilege and subordination.

Several problematic trends exist in scholarship on the theory and application of intersectionality. First, most scholars tend to look at how individuals experience multiple oppressions, excluding the possibility that many individuals experience privilege in conjunction with oppression. Second, many scholars, though they leave room for privilege to be considered in their work, choose not to discuss those positions. Third, those scholars who do explicitly argue intersectionality involves simultaneous positions of oppression *and* privilege often do not take on analyses that explore this specific dynamic.

First, while Crenshaw does not exclude the possibility of considering how individuals experience both oppression and privilege, she tends to focus on intersecting oppressions. Likewise, discussions and applications of Crenshaw's theory often fail to explore how privilege operates intersectionally. Much of the scholarship that draws from Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality has followed suit, either ignoring or overlooking the intersectionality of identities which place individuals in positions of privilege, of power, in collusion with oppressive forces as they are simultaneously oppressed.

Such work includes Joan Acker's work on inequality regimes. She introduces the concept of inequality regimes, "interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities," to understand the way they operate within work organizations (441). Her essay focuses on how people experience inequality, so does not break it down into positions of oppression and privilege. Therefore it does not explore how oppressed-oppressor dynamics arise. Similarly, in her work exploring feminist HIV/AIDS research, Anna Bredstrom calls for a more intersectional approach; however, her call extends to an intersectional approach that conceives of intersectionality as a set of interlocking oppressions not including privilege. Adia Harvey takes a similar stance in her research that looks at intersections of race, class and gender in black beauty

salons. She focuses on experiences of inequality but also focuses on experiences of oppression only. Leslie McCall does the same when, in an essay exploring intersectionality as methodology, she defines an intersectional method as one that explores axes of inequality. Assata Zerai maintains this definition, looking at intersectionality as a tool for analyzing the interlocking spheres in which domination occurs. She discusses how we are subjugated by systems of oppression; however, she does not address how at the same time one can be in collusion with systems of oppression. Finally, adopting this same approach are Rose Brewer, Cecilia Conrad & Mary King. Focusing primarily on feminist economics, these authors argue that intersectional analysis is necessary to understand the intersectional experiences of “women whose lives are ordered by race and class as well as gender,” as though all women’s lives aren’t ordered by such things (3-4). Their approach seems to assume that a woman whose life is ordered by those things is a woman who experiences oppression based on them, and not a woman who is privileged because of them.

Still, other scholars leave out the possibility for privilege to be explored by intersectionality in terms of the language they use to define it. For example, Brah & Phoenix describe intersectionality in more ambiguous terms than “signifying multiple axes of oppression.” Instead, they explain it as signifying multiple axes of differentiation, so while they do not eliminate the possibility they also do not highlight it (76). Also, Mieke Verloo describes intersectionality in similar terms. While this article addresses the possibilities of intersectionality by using the more ambiguous phrase of "multiple inequalities" which suggests an inclusion of oppression and privilege, it assumes that the subjects of intersectional analysis are always on the marginal side of the "inequality."

Second, other scholars recognize that privilege can play a part in intersectional identities though they do not necessarily take them as central to their intersectional theory or analysis. Such scholars include Marjo Buitelaar, who uses the concept of the dialogical self, “how individuals speak from different I-positions within the self,” in conjunction with intersectionality (262). She recognizes that tensions exist between an individual’s identities; however, the subjects of her analysis include individuals who experience tensions between multiples positions of marginalization. Margo Okazawa-Rey, recognizes that intersectionality includes privilege and oppression, arguing that it “refers to the dynamic interaction and interrelatedness of social ascription, such as gender, class, race, and nation, and the power, privilege, and disadvantage they entail, often in contradictory ways, depending on the context” (376). At the same time, though, Okazawa-Rey defines patriarchy as the dominance of men over women, which suggests women are not necessarily perpetrators of patriarchy – a stance that is in tension with her view of intersectionality.

The problems currently present within the scholarship on intersectionality could originate from a number of possible causes. Perhaps, scholars perceive the experience of oppression as more influential in shaping one’s identity (and thus the articulation of that identity) than the experience of privilege; therefore, they focus primarily on intersectional oppression in their analyses. In her work which adopts intersectional methodology to explore fractures within the black community in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, Cathy Cohen provides evidence that suggests this perception may be present. In a discussion of marginalization and identity construction she writes of how “researchers become consumed with analyzing power as it is exercised by dominant groups “over” disadvantaged or “powerless” groups and decision-making patterns situation within marginalized communities are often left unpursued” (Cohen 36). She

argues the importance of dismantling the dichotomy between powerful and powerless in the practice of intersectional research to “examine the multiple sites where power is located” (36). Her work implies that research that only explores oppression could not expose entirely the discourses of marginalization both experienced and perpetuated. Even if this were true in many instances, one should not follow a trajectory that continually overlooks any of the major elements of an individual’s identity construction, as they inevitably influence the other elements (positions of privileged or oppressed).

It could also be that many individuals, scholars or otherwise, do not see certain identity positions as privileged. Perhaps they view them as neutral and thus unimportant in determining an individual’s articulation of identity. The work of Nakayama and Krizek provides support, using the concept of whiteness, that uninterrogated discourses of identity can perpetuate racist structures in commonly undetected ways. They write, “‘White’ is relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of both those within and without its domain” (291). Though they focus only on whiteness their work speaks to a larger trend that may be present within intersectional scholarship: failure to explore privilege as important to rhetorical identity construction. However, if one does not recognize the privileges they (or others) are afforded due to, for example, the color of their skin, the size of their bank account, the sex of their body, or the object of their sexual desire, they often are not aware of how those privileges and their accompanying discourses can operate to disempower others. Nakayama and Krizek, as well as Cohen would argue that a person does not have to either be oppressive or oppressed; they can be both - precisely why both must be left open for discussion in intersectional research.

Looking at how a person's sex, race, or class, for example, each impacts her experiences and discourse individually maintains the false assumptions that all who share those identities (and experience those forms of oppression and privilege) have shared experiences and that those forms of discrimination (experienced and perpetuated) do not influence each other in significant ways.⁴ If this assumption is perpetuated we will continue to misunderstand and misrepresent the intersectional identities of oppressed oppressors. Further, if scholars do not look at positions of oppression as well as privilege, they will fail to achieve the goal which Crenshaw put forth for her theory, an understanding of individuals' experiences beyond the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination (94). When and where an individual's experience includes being part of an oppressed group as well as an oppressive one, both of those affiliations must be considered.

Some scholars, exploring the possibilities for intersectional methodologies, do call for perspectives that consider both oppression and privilege. It is from their work that I draw to construct my own perspective when critiquing White's rhetoric. For example, Dorte Staunaes and Nira Yuval-Davis both recognize the need for this expanded approach. Staunaes writes, "Social categories do not count only for the Others, the non-powerful and the non-privileged: they also count as conditions for the more privileged and powerful people. In that sense, the experiences of the social categories of ethnicity and gender are not only types of minority experiences" (105). White's identities which place her in positions of privilege, power, dominance, are part of the social categorization she experiences. Multiple privileges, as experienced by an individual who is also oppressed, like White, create fundamentally different

⁴ Several major works which do this include, but are not limited to Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, and Susan Huxman's work on early feminist leaders in the 19th and 20th centuries including E.C. Stanton, C.C. Catt and A.H. Shaw.

experiences of privilege and thus of oppression. This implies the non-universal manner in which privilege is experienced. To amend the existing theory and application of intersectionality I propose a perspective that not only allows for exploration of positions of privilege and oppression, but views an intersectional approach as incomplete if both are not considered.

Although the subjects of historical/descriptive analysis and analytical/rhetorical analysis have for so long been populated primarily by the privileged, it is important to consider that many (maybe even most) subjects of contemporary intersectional analysis experience both privilege and oppression; therefore we need to consider both. It is also important to understand how experiences of oppression can be compounded, complicated and contrasted by experiences of privilege. Further, to look at how some individuals are both oppressed and oppressors is also to look beyond traditional boundaries of discrimination, something which Crenshaw argues is important to effective intersectional analysis.

Intersectionality becomes most useful when we enter into a terrain that allows for the treatment of both oppression and privilege as non-universal and dynamic. It also becomes a useful tool for rhetorical analysis when used to look at how individuals articulate, negotiate and reconcile tensions within their discourse of identity construction. As a tool for rhetorical critics intersectionality can help us to diagnose problems with public discourse because it offers a way for us to talk about both what is said and what is left unstated. Theories of intersectionality could help critics to focus on experiences of identity. However, the scholarship on intersectionality is less about public advocacy--rhetoric, appeals to situated audiences--than about individual identity formation. Exploring the rhetoric of Alma B. White will afford an opportunity to use intersectional theory in this underutilized way.

Method

Examining White's articulation of identity through a lens that recognizes her positions of privilege and oppression will require that I look to the most important of White's primary texts, those which offer the richest evidence for how she rhetorically negotiated her intersectional identities. Her autobiographical works will be my focus, for as Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet states, "The autobiographical process uses not only facts and events, but also social representation and cultural values. A tension exists between self and society, which is resolved by the narrative presentation of a unique self" (61). Utilizing the tools of intersectionality for my rhetorical analysis, this project will focus on the autobiographical writings where Alma White expressed her adherence to the personal as well as social roles she saw herself fulfilling and attempted to negotiate the spaces between. Incidentally, much of the literature White authored was autobiographical. I will focus primarily on her major autobiography, the 5-volume *Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*. While there are no specific reviews of this book by White's contemporaries, the book is marketed by the Pillar of Fire Press as "One of the most remarkable autobiographies ever written." This marketing reveals the way it was intended to be read, how the publishers (which included White herself) felt about the book's importance. They claim the book "[s]hows God's providential dealings in the smallest details of [Alma White's] life. Inspires one to endure hardness for the cause of right. Words are inadequate to describe the contents of these volumes" (White, *Musings*, 109). Its autobiographical nature as well as its predominant placement by White's publishing company within her larger collection of works suggest this work is important for understanding White's life and thus her rhetorical construction of identity. I will also, however, consider other relevant works including: *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy*, *Heroes of the Fiery Cross*, *Klansmen: Guardians of Liberty*, *Woman's Chains*,

Looking Back from Beulah, Truth Stranger Than Fiction, My Trip to the Orient, and With God in Yellowstone. These texts serve as a gateway to reveal articulated identities to which Alma White laid claim. While they offer such potential, a close textual analysis of any of her works has yet to be performed by a rhetorical critic, by someone paying close attention to the use of specific rhetorical strategies – symbol use, identity formation, argument, narrative. Such an analysis will lay the groundwork for the historical/contextual discussion that needs to take place in order to better understand the rhetoric of White’s cultural logic.

Edward Fischer defines cultural logic as “generative principles realized through cognitive schemas that promote intersubjective continuity and are conditioned by the unique contingencies of life histories and structural positions in political-economic systems” (473). I adopt this concept as a tool for understanding Alma White’s rhetoric and the logic from which she articulates her identity and defends her epistemological positions. It is a logic lodged within the cultural lessons of her everyday life, lessons which she verbalizes in her works. Fischer argues that different cultures and individuals navigate the world armed with different cultural logics, some of which do not uniformly conform to the syllogistic “law” of noncontradiction (477). A rhetorical analysis of White’s rhetoric will show that her logic fits within this description. Her unique intersections of marginalization and power were woven together by White as she attempted to rhetorically carve out her identity. Still, the identity intersections at/in which she lived were clearly grown from the time and space in which she lived, thus proper contextualization for how she articulates an intersectional rhetoric is necessary.

This analysis seeks to provide insight into White’s purposes for putting forward her autobiographical rhetoric and to investigate the rhetorical strategies she employs in pursuit of those objectives. White exhibits two major tangible goals in her work: to identify with readers to

convert and retain readers to the Pillar of Fire organization. Intersectional analysis can help to account for how she appeals to readers. Based on audience, context, and purpose, throughout her work, White features some aspects of her identity more so than others. Since all her intersectional identities are inextricably connected (an assumption intersectional theory keeps in the forefront of analysis), how she presents one aspect of her identity pressures her to present other parts in particular ways. In short, this analysis also looks to how her rhetorical choices enable and constrain.

Plan of Study

“Chapter 2: Alma White's Life and Career in Rhetorical Construction”

This chapter will discuss Alma White’s childhood, early adulthood, education, introduction to religion, and marriage and family, in an effort to provide grounding for the major identity constructions she fashions throughout her writings. I will also flesh out her later life, illustrating how particular identities emerged as most prominent in her writing/preaching/rhetoric.

“Chapter 3: The Rhetorical Pillars of Alma White’s Identity”

To explain White’s goal and strategy of identity construction, this chapter will explore White’s *Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*. It will explore her rhetorical struggle to fashion herself as a divinely inspired fundamentalist Methodist preacher, advocate of woman’s rights and patriotic supporter of the KKK. I will consider her posturing of multiple rhetorical identities directed toward overcoming her ideological, religious and rhetorical barriers and achieving her goal of identity construction. I will reflect on White’s negotiation of the tensions amid her

various identities, to unpack the oppressed oppressor role she occupied throughout her life and articulated in her writing/rhetoric.

“Chapter 4: The Rhetorical Pillars of Conversion and Devotion”

This chapter will explore Alma White’s rhetorical objective of religious conversion and devotion. As an evangelical preacher, White sought to identify with readers to create and maintain the converted. I will expound upon the barriers and advantages she encountered toward these goals and flesh out her major rhetorical strategies adapted to these ends.

“Chapter 5: Conclusion”

In this chapter I will provide summary, offer implications for my research as well as address its limitations. I will also discuss potential for future research.

Summary

Alma B. White is an understudied subject of historical, rhetorical, and critical significance. This lack of critical attention can be addressed through an analysis that distinguishes not disregards the tensions within her intersectional rhetoric. Her life and collection of works not only present a compelling narrative, but they represent an opportunity for exploration of a common yet uncommonly discussed intersectional dynamic: that of the oppressed oppressor. Making use of intersectional analysis to do this takes advantage of a constructive variation on its customary application. Instead of looking just at axes of oppression, this variation looks also to the intersecting axes of privilege. To open intersectional analysis up to this possibility is to greatly expand the potential for revealing how structures of oppression

operate discursively from perspectives of the perpetrators and the victims, particularly when one individual embodies both perspectives simultaneously.

CHAPTER TWO

ALMA WHITE'S LIFE AND CAREER IN RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION

It has already been established that scholars have almost entirely overlooked the complex life and works of Alma White. Those few scholars who have rescued her from complete obscurity by writing biographical accounts have depended on an oversimplified and selective attribution of agency when it comes to her life experiences. When White performs an act worthy of celebration, such as her support for women's equality in the church, she is characterized as "the most outspoken on women's rights" (Pope-Levison 139) who practiced strength, ability or pioneering spirit. For example, Susie Cunningham Stanley writes, "In an effort to demolish inequality [Alma White] indeed wielded sledgehammer blows in the pulpit and through her writings" (*Feminist*, 1). When White performs an objectionable act, such as affiliating herself and her organization with the KKK, she is described as "a woman of her times" (Brown xii) who expressed "excessive patriotism" and merely succumbed to the powerful social forces and "accepted racist attitudes prevalent in the United States" (Wagner 30). Susan Hill Lindley, for example, characterizes White's affiliation with the KKK as based solely on her incorrect perception that the KKK opposed modernism and Catholicism; that these elements were "far more central to her than [the KKK's] anti-black and anti-Semitic agenda" (331). While I do not doubt Alma's role as an active agent when working toward equality for women, I am not as eager to dismiss her agency when it comes to her affiliation with the KKK. Determining whether a biographical subject is either completely with or completely without agency in specific circumstances of her life is altogether impossible and not necessarily useful, yet most scholars profiling White take stances which select and simplify in this manner. The unfortunate result of such a trend is that we have an unnecessarily incomplete and likely inaccurate biographical

understanding of White's life and career. With this in mind, it is my goal to offer a contextualization of White's rhetoric by chronicling her life and career without falling into the practice of attributing agency in absolute terms by grounding my research in White's own words. In doing so I am adopting an intersectional philosophy which seeks not to evaluate the positions and actions White took as to be celebrated or to be downplayed, but rather as rhetorical by design and therefore influenced by both herself and her surroundings simultaneously. My goal is to move away from ascribing agency in terms so unequivocal while still providing a rich retelling of the most compelling aspects of Alma White's life and work.⁵

Just as Alma White's rhetorical construction of identity contradicts any simplified view of oppression and privilege as separate and universally experienced, her life contradicts any simplified understanding of agency as either completely present or absent. A discussion of White's childhood and early adulthood, marriage and family, and religious, social and political work will help to explain how her experience resists dichotomous categorization and provide the necessary contextualization to uncover the major identity constructions she fashions throughout her writings. Ultimately, it will help to provide the framework necessary for fleshing out which of her various and intersecting identities emerged most prominently in her autobiographical work.

⁵ For a more detailed account of Alma White's life see Susie Cunningham Stanley's work *Feminist Pillar of Fire*. It provides useful insight into the intricacies of her daily life, as before she died Arlene White Lawrence (Alma's granddaughter) granted Stanley access to Alma's personal diaries which chronicled her life after 1925 until her death – the period of time which her autobiography does not cover. For a much more detailed account of Alma's life you can turn to the prolific set of autobiographical works which she writes. These include her original six volume edition of *The Story of My Life*, the reissued and condensed five volume edition of *The Story of My Life*, *Looking Back From Beulah*, *My Trip to the Orient*, *With God in Yellowstone*, and *Truth Stranger than Fiction*.

Childhood and Early Adulthood

Amidst the conclusion of the American Civil War, while William Moncure and Mary Ann Bridwell were struggling to make ends meet with their already large family, Mollie Alma Bridwell, their seventh child of eleven, was born. Raised along the Kinniconick River in rural Lewis County, Kentucky, Alma was grateful for her rural upbringing, believing there was “no education more to be prized than that received under circumstances where isolation from the world with all its vanities is so marked” (*Story* 1:127-128). Alma grew up in a household where she was often unhappy. She recalls at a young age being told her parents were disappointed she was not a boy, as a male child would have been more able to help with work around the house and at the tannery which her father operated. She writes,

It was often said by my parents that I should have been a boy; and I felt keenly that they had never gotten over their disappointment. However, I was tolerated, and thrived as well as could be expected under the circumstances, but it was sometimes difficult to dispel the gloom that forced itself into the silent chambers of my heart. (*Story* 1st edition, 1: 61)

To make matters worse, according to Alma she was “overgrown” for her age, and others in her family looked upon her as the oddest and least attractive one of the family (*Story* 1: 11). She writes, “It was an unconcealed fact that I was the homeliest one of all” (*Story* 1:44-45). Alma sensed she was treated differently because her family had different expectations for her. This treatment extended beyond her physical appearance into her education. Even before she was old enough to go to school Alma longed for an education. Alma recalls having to stay near her mother continually and she was kept home to care for her siblings and help with household

chores while her sisters were allowed to go to school. She tried as best she could to teach herself, though other domestic duties often kept her from her studies. Eventually she was allowed to attend school at age 11 (*Story* 1:77).

She was baptized just before her 13th birthday and shortly after the Rev. W.B. Godbey began services in a town near her home, she was converted to Methodism (*Story* 1:160). She decided at this time that she was going to someday preach the gospel to share with others the joy she felt at the onset of her conversion. While she assumed her role would be as a foreign missionary, standard for women looking to do God's work at the time, the Holy Spirit spoke to her and called for her to stay in the homeland to carry out her holy work (*Story* 1:161). She immediately sought a way to do this and "it occurred to [her] that [she] could find this door as a school teacher – that [she] could begin with her pupils and their parents" (*Story* 1:164). She set out to become a school teacher, attending the district school for a time and eventually moving on to the Seminary School at Vanceburg in February of 1878. Alma decided to follow her belief that teaching may open an opportunity for preaching, and in the summer of 1879 she passed her teaching certificate exam which helped her to secure a teaching job just four miles from her home. While this offered a sense of independence for Alma, all of the money she garnered was taken by her mother to support the family.

Meanwhile, she prayed daily for an opportunity to preach in the Lord's service, as without this chance she felt as though she was "passing through a spiritual desert" (*Story* 1:170). In August of 1879, one glimmer of hope reared its head. While attending a local church service she was told she may be called upon to pray. Having memorized a prayer for the occasion, she was prepared. However, when Gus Frazell finished his sermon and asked Alma to pray, her mind went blank. She writes,

In my extremity and embarrassment I broke out under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and prayed until it seemed that the foundations of perdition were shaken. I saw sinners standing on the ragged edges of an awful abyss, ready to plunge in and be lost forever. After this momentary vision of hell there was no lack of language to express my thought.

(*Story 1: 172*)

Silence then weeping and finally shouts of victory followed – just the experience Alma longed for to refresh her soul, encouraging her preaching aspirations. Her spiritual mentor, William Godbey, offered little in the way of encouragement for these aspirations, however. When she expressed her interest in preaching, he said that she “should be a Methodist preacher’s wife, that this would give [her] a wide field for Christian work” (*Story 1:182*). Alma, refusing to be wholly discouraged by his words, resolved to answer a more definite call.

Not finding the opportunities she sought in Kentucky and unhappy, Alma felt she “could not live at home much longer” (*Story 1:198*). In the summer of 1891, her Aunt Eliza Mason, who lived in Montana, came to visit her parents’ home in Kentucky. She wanted to bring one of Alma’s sisters, Lida or Nora, back to Montana with her. As Alma describes it, when they both declined her offer Eliza reluctantly accepted Alma as consolation (*Story 1:198*). On March 20th, 1882 Alma left for Bannack, Montana, where she secured a teaching position in the spring. While she enjoyed her newfound independence, Alma found great disappointment with the environment in which she lived. She was often asked to go to social events, and when she declined was told her Kentucky resistance would soon fade and she would eventually partake in the festivities. Alma refused to believe this, determining “to show them that they could not mold [her] according to their predictions, that [she] was different and would remain different from all

other persons they had seen or known...[They] lived to see their mistake” (*Story* 1:216). These people partook in dances and played cards, activities which Alma viewed as unsavory.

One bit of socializing in which Alma was happy to partake was with a young preacher who came to her Aunt Eliza’s home to speak with Eliza’s husband, Mr. D.B. Mason. Kent White, Alma’s husband-to-be, had been sent by the Rev. William Van Orsdale to fill an appointment at the Bannack Methodist Church. Kent and Alma became quick friends in the several days they spent together as Kent stayed at her aunt and uncle’s home. They agreed to correspond after Kent left town. In writing about meeting Mr. White, Alma recalled Rev. Godbey’s advice to marry a minister. Such thoughts, she said, gave her great comfort as she suspected he held strong feelings for her (*Story* 1:235-236). When she finally saw Mr. White again at a Methodist Conference six months later, he pleaded with her to follow him to Denver where he was to attend the Methodist University. She declined as she was already obligated to teach for the winter in Montana, but agreed to keep mutual correspondence.

Alma felt increasingly isolated in Montana and, when she received news of her sister Martha’s death, she took it as a sign that her time there should come to a close (*Story* 1:246). She decided to return home to Kentucky and attend school at a female college near Millersburg. She determined her studies were suffering too greatly because of her familial obligations, so as soon as she finished school she went back to Montana where she found yet another teaching position. Still displeased with her situation in Montana and longing for sanctification,⁶ her restlessness seemed to be calmed for a time when, in November of 1886, Alma and Kent White

⁶ Susie Cunningham Stanley writes, “Perfection and holiness are synonyms for sanctification, a second distinct work of grace, with conversion or justification being the first work of grace. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism...believed that the witness of the Holy Spirit established that a person possessed Christian perfection or sanctification” (*Feminist* 21).

were engaged and she vowed to “make any sacrifice to help him in his work” (*Story* 1:286). They were married on Wednesday, December 21st, 1887.

Early Marriage and Family

After they were married Kent failed to find accommodations Alma felt were suitable, and she soon took ill. Her husband did not take her infirmity seriously, leaving her alone for hours on end. She decided that she must endure, understanding that even though this experience may suggest future marital problems, she “had taken a companion for better or worse, and [her] only hope for future happiness was to overlook his imperfections” (*Story* 1:308). This proved to be more difficult than she imagined when in November 1888 her mother-in-law, Mary White, came to stay with Alma and Kent. Kent and his mother stayed up into the night talking and keeping Alma from her rest. Worse yet, comparing Alma to Lizzie White, Kent’s sister, “they magnified [Lizzie’s] virtues to show their disappointment in [Alma], and to make [her] feel that [she] had married above [her] station” (*Story* 1:319). Like her parents and siblings, they remarked on Alma’s overgrown physique. Kent expressed regret that his mother was disappointed with her as his wife, that Kent had made a mistake in marrying Alma. While dealing with this hostile environment, Alma was also forced to endure a difficult pregnancy and birth with her first child.

On March 15th, 1889 Arthur Kent was born. Alma’s doctor told Kent and Mary that Alma was in a desperate state and so was to have a nurse in her care at all times. Against the doctor’s order, her mother-in-law turned the nurse away after a week, and her husband made no attempt to find another. Even though Alma’s health soon grew worse, her husband and mother-in-law were “unconcerned” (*Story* 1:333). When the doctor finally came he chided Kent for not securing a nurse or calling him sooner and threatened to report the neglect to officials. Alma

tried to patch things with a direct appeal: “Mother, I hope there will be no hard feelings between us. I have none toward you and wish you to feel the same toward me.” Mrs. White replied, “I don’t care if you hate me like a rattlesnake” (*Story* 1:335). Shortly after, Mary returned home to West Virginia. This experience, no doubt, marked Alma’s relationship with Mrs. White for years to come evidenced by the fact that she failed to visit again.

On August 24, 1892 Alma gave birth to her second child, Ray Bridwell, who became gravely ill with pneumonia shortly after his birth. After all hope was lost, the doctor told Alma that her son would not make it through the night. Alma writes:

As I stood looking into the face of the little one whose life was slowly ebbing away, the Lord spoke to my soul: ‘If I spare him will you devote your life to the ministry of my Word?’ Hope revived as I yielded to the Holy Spirit’s entreaty. Instantly the child’s pulse grew stronger, and an hour and a half later he had passed the crisis... There was not alternative now, I had to devote my life to the preaching of God’s word, regardless of the opposition everywhere to woman’s ministry. (*Story* 1:402-403)

She continuously sought ways to fulfill this calling, with little to no encouragement from her husband. She felt she had no choice. She “must get sanctified or [her] doom was sealed.” She began to fast, and after two days and “the twinkling of an eye” she felt her heart was clean (*Story* 1: 409). According to Alma, sanctification served to break the bonds which held her back from preaching and allowed her to see more keenly the carnality of others. She saw her husband more clearly. She writes:

The light now shone over my pathway since my marriage to Kent... I could see how he had been deceived, and was then in a state of spiritual darkness. It is said that love is

blind, but it takes sanctification to open one's eyes. I would have made any sacrifice for him, but I could no longer trust him as my spiritual head. (*Story* 1:415)

Resolute in remaining true to her nuptial vows, Alma recognized the pain she suffered at the hands of her husband, but felt she must make the best of it.

Early Preaching and a Break from the Church

Alma first found a way to fulfill God's calling to preach during a revival on a Sunday morning in the fall of 1893. When the pastor found himself at a loss for words he called on Alma to speak. She celebrated her victory, and began to speak regularly at local revival meetings. Word spread of Alma's preaching and "people came from all over the county to attend the services" (*Story* 1:429). She soon realized, however, her husband would present great resistance to her newfound role, and she suspected he harbored jealousy toward her (*Story* 1:430).

Although Alma was still officially affiliated with the Methodist Church, because of the opposition she received she was convinced her "work in connection with the old denomination was closing up" (*Story* 2:11). She saw the official church as having lost its way, unable to guide souls. While this was distressing for her, she argued her strongest opposition and most difficult obstacle was found in her own home - the disapproval from her husband. Seemingly undaunted by these barriers, Alma began conducting independent revivals in the spring of 1894, amassing crowds of people eager to hear her speak. Her break from the church marked not only a break from Methodism, but a break from organized religion as she knew it. She explains, "I had not only died to Methodism, but to all other denominations as well, and my soul was scaling the heights of victory" (*Story* 2:45). Her success in preaching and separation from Methodism

brought about her desire to share her experiences of conviction, conversion, and sanctification and she set out to write her book, *Looking Back From Beulah*, published in 1902.

Establishment of the Pillar of Fire Organization

Kent and Alma decided to move from Erie, Colorado to Denver, where they opened several missions and began to hold daily prayer meetings. They also opened a school where the missionaries were to be trained. Problems arose when Kent felt as though he was not receiving his due recognition. He threatened to leave and “go away to California or some other place” and not return (*Story 2:99*). Meanwhile, happy with the success of their work in Denver so far, Alma felt there was more she could do to actualize her call from God. In early December of 1901, Alma surveyed the regular attendees of revival meetings and mission workers, inquiring about the interest in the formation of an independent church. She wasted no time in acting upon the encouraging responses she received and by December 29th, in the absence of her husband, the society of the Pentecostal Union (later renamed the Pillar of Fire) was born, boasting fifty charter members. In addition to the missions in Colorado, Alma and Kent had opened missions in three other states, placing pastors who had trained at the Denver mission in charge.

The first six months of the Pillar of Fire’s (POF) proved to be very trying for Alma, as many of the members were staying connected to their old churches and Kent was antagonistic, causing many members to question the formation of the new organization. Apart from her husband, she forced many members to choose – cut old ties or leave the POF- and of the fifty charter members more than half proved “unfaithful” (*Story 2:210*). Perhaps sensing the need to raise retention, Alma decided to open a home and school for children in 1902. Also, she was ordained an elder by five other ordained ministers, even though she had been operating in such a

capacity for some time. She writes, “For years, as a preacher of the Gospel, I had suffered humiliating handicaps on account of my sex, but this achievement broke my chains in a measure, and liberated me, placing diamonds in my crown of rejoicing” (*Story 2:228*). The victory, however, was short lived, as their organization began to experience regular hostility from Denver police when holding their open air meetings. As a result they attracted publicity and even more opposition, but also more converts.

Zarephath, New Jersey

In the fall of 1905 Alma received a letter from Carrie Garretson from Bound Brook, New Jersey, who wished to attend POF bible school to become a missionary. The letter also stated that her family owned a farm and they wished to give the title to some religious organization so it may be used for holy work. Alma was elated at this possibility, unaware of the struggle her organization would have with the Burning Bush organization over the land. The Burning Bush was a rival church to which Ms. Garretson previously belonged which was now arguing they had ownership rights to the farm as Garretson had promised it to them in a letter. They attempted to spread the word that Alma White had “lost God and was no longer led by the Holy Spirit” (*Story 2:384*). Ms. Garretson settled the matter, retracting her earlier letter and concluding that POF should have it. Several weeks after the matter was settled, Alma claims God spoke to her: “He made it clear to me that He wanted a children’s home and school on the newly acquired estate at Bound Brook, N.J., and that plans should be made at once to construct a new building there” (*Story 2:402*). Even though they had few resources, Alma discerned there was nothing to do but have faith and move forward.

The acquisition of the Bound Brook Estate marked a new chapter in the POF organization. The land was given a new name – Zarephath – which means “a workshop for refining metals” (*Story 2:406*). The POF’s move to New Jersey happened gradually and by 1908 the national headquarters of the organization was moved from Denver to Zarephath. According to Alma, this meant that:

[They] were placed at the gateway to the mission fields of the world, where [their] people could travel to foreign shores with as little difficulty and expense as to the remote parts of the United States, thus fulfilling the promise the Lord had given...that the Pillar of Fire should be a prophet to the nations. (*Story 3:iii*)

She worked to fulfill this promise by opening a mission in London to continue the work of the existing missions in Colorado, Utah, Montana and New Jersey. She also opened the Zarephath Academy, which eventually led to the creation of Alma White College in Zarephath, Belleview Junior College in Denver and mission schools in Los Angeles, Cincinnati and Jacksonville.

Continuing Marriage Troubles

While all of these developments were taking place, Alma continued to write “tracts, hymns, articles for [her] 7 magazines and...manuscripts for books” and battle with her adversaries who sought to misrepresent the work of the POF (*Story 3:35, 37*). She was also struggling to mend a troubled marriage. In September of 1908 Kent went to Colorado where he attended a meeting of the Latter Rain, a Pentecostal organization. When he returned to New Jersey, he repudiated the doctrines which he had preached since childhood, and Alma felt his attitude toward his family changed so much so that “it was evident by his actions that he was preparing to leave” (*Story 3:97*). It was especially hard for Alma because she felt he had fallen

prey to such “sorcery” due to her preaching, that even though he had previously advocated woman’s ministry, “it had come closer to him than he had contemplated and he was found totally unprepared for it” (*Story 3:116-117*). On August 11, 1909 Kent told Alma he was going to sever his relationship with the POF unless he was treated as the head of the organization (*Story 3:146*). This grieved her greatly; nevertheless, she concluded that she must continue directing the organization as her soul was at stake, no matter if it meant her relationship with her husband would suffer. Up until this point she and others in the POF had refrained from disavowing specific churches. However, she was compelled to speak out against the sort of religious counterfeits with which her husband now affiliated. To do this she wrote a book published in 1910 called *Demons and Tongues*. Also, she eventually decided to tell the truth about her estrangement with Kent. She made up her mind to file a complaint of desertion against him in the New Jersey court, however humiliating it may be for her or him. Though she did not want a divorce, she thought she had no other options, as she was convinced Kent was determined to break up the POF and take financial control of all the real estate it owned. The judge agreed that Alma and the POF were under no obligation to Kent White financially, but decided that since there was still affection on both sides, a legal separation was not needed. This did little to change either Alma or Kent’s feelings and the two remained estranged.

The Great War

In September of 1914 Alma’s work became occupied with the politics of the war. She began publishing *The British Sentinel*, a British version of the periodical *Good Citizen*, which she had started the year before as “God’s mouthpiece for exposing political Romanism in its efforts to gain the ascendancy in the United States” and “an effectual weapon against immorality and crime” (*Story 3:293*). By the end of the war in 1918 Alma White had traveled across the

Atlantic at least a dozen times, published multiple national and international periodicals, conducted countless revivals at home and abroad, and was formally consecrated bishop, giving the Pillar of Fire, as journalists described it, “the honor of having the first woman bishop” (*Story* 4:208). In the years leading up to the end of the Great War, Alma tirelessly conducted POF activities in the face of unyielding antagonism from her husband, other religious organizations, newspapers and law enforcement. One incident in particular left a lasting impression on Alma and the POF and may offer some insight into their eventual connection to the Ku Klux Klan and Alma’s view of the Great War. In June of 1915, when the POF was conducting a revival in Rainfield, NJ, their facilities were set up adjacent to the police station. Several protesters showed up on the grounds, and when Alma asked a police officer to “quiet the disturbers, he refused to do so saying ‘You started this fight’” (*Story* 4:65). The protestors, who Alma discerned were made up mostly of Roman Catholics, became “insolent, threatening violence to the speakers and others” but the police, “Romanist” as they were, offered little protection for the POF and its members (*Story* 4:66). When accounts of the incident appeared in the local newspapers and criticized police for failing to perform their duties, Alma felt validated, drawing a connection between the Great War and the battle going on at home:

With the battle raging in the European war theater, it proved to be necessary for our people to have a war at home in order to teach them by actual experience the source of the trouble across the sea. Some of us knew. The Protestant churches had become impotent, nowhere fearlessly lifting their voices against political Romanism making road upon Church and State. (*Story* 4:72)

She sought ways for her organization to become the “prophet of nations” which God had called it to be, which, in Alma’s eyes, the U.S. government was failing to be (*Story* 4:196-7). For her, the

success of this search grew more promising with the 1919 passing of the woman suffrage amendment and “the rising of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan,” for both posed threats to counterfeit Christianity which sought to oppress women and pervert religion (*Story* 4:370, 246).

The Ku Klux Klan

In December of 1922, Alma had what she claimed to be her first introduction to the KKK, when two masked and robed men entered a Monday evening service and handed her fifty dollars. Her true first encounter, however, may have occurred a few months earlier when a letter scrolled across the top of an issue of the POF’s *Good Citizen* was sent to the *Denver Catholic Register* reading, “The Romanist is the worst of all, but he and the nigger and the I.W.W., the Jew and every other bad citizen must get out” (Stanley, *Feminist* 85). Far from just accepting the KKK’s support of the POF, Alma advocated for the KKK. She gave an interview “in favor of the Klan as a protection to the nation against the enemies of religious and political leaders,” allowed for the KKK to use the Bound Brook facilities, distributed her literature at their events, and sought out and attended KKK assemblies (*Story* 5:209, 236, 263). In September of 1923 she was invited to speak at a gathering of Klansmen in St. Louis. She accepted and was greeted with “approval and applause” looking at this, and other opportunities to speak on their behalf as a privilege. While Alma credits the KKK with helping when “the very existence of her organization was in peril,” she also claims that the POF’s literature had a major impact in swaying the November 1923 elections in several states to favor members of the KKK (*Story* 5:265, 279). She wrote three book-length works espousing the virtues of the KKK including *Heroes of the Fiery Cross*, *Klansmen: Guardians of Liberty* and *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy*. From all accounts, a reciprocal relationship between the POF and the KKK was forged. Alma

wrote about the KKK as an organization which not only shared her anti-Catholicism but, among other things, her beliefs in patriotism, temperance, white supremacy, and women's rights.

Women's Rights

While Alma White enacted her beliefs in women's rights continuously throughout her life, focusing primarily on the woman's ministry, her more political work in this respect picked up greatly after the Susan B. Anthony Amendment was ratified in 1920. Unlike many suffragists in the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Alma did not see the 19th Amendment as the end of the political battle for women's rights but rather as the beginning. This stance aligned her more with (what many saw as the more radical) National Woman's Party (NWP). She supported other work of the NWP in her advocacy of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and approval of their public protest tactics (Stanley, *Feminist* 106). In addition to her actions, her literary works written after the enfranchisement of women clearly illustrate her continued dedication to woman's cause. In 1924 Alma began publishing a periodical entitled *Woman's Chains* which took up the cause of restoring woman to her rightful place. That same year saw the POF joining with the NWP in their support of the ERA. Susie Cunningham Stanley claims the POF was "the only religious group to endorse the ERA from its inception, yet no studies of the amendment acknowledge Alma's or her church's support" (*Feminist* 112). In 1943 Alma published her book with the same name as her periodical, *Woman's Chains*, which refuted many arguments waged against women's rights and built arguments for why women should be allowed to preach, freely participate in politics, be equally represented under the law, and be free from discrimination and restrictive clothing. Because she saw women and children as the "greatest sufferers from the curse of liquor," Alma also wrote about and actively sought to eliminate the ravages of alcohol (*Story* 4:45). In describing alcohol she writes, "There has been no slavery

comparable with the chains that alcohol has forged” (*Story* 4:44). After prohibition was repealed in 1933 Alma began publishing a magazine, *Dry Legion*, wrote two plays illustrating the evils of alcohol, and distributed petitions to allow citizens to vote on prohibition once again (Stanley, *Feminist* 115). Up until the end of her life Alma White traversed the country, enacting the female ministry, fighting diligently for what she saw as the advancement the rights of women.

The POF Commune

Although Alma constantly traveled across the county (and throughout the world) to and from her various missions, she had what Stanley describes as an “extreme hostility toward the world” because of her sectarianism (*Feminist* 66). One recalls her early childhood belief that no education was to be more “prized than that received under circumstances where isolation from the world with all its vanities is so marked” (*Story* 1:127-128). Unlike most other Wesleyan/Holiness groups who disassociated themselves from the sinful world, the POF physically separated themselves as well, forming a commune, a self-contained city for her followers (Stanley, *Feminist* 66). By 1913 Zarephath had its own post office, vehicles, and a boiler and engine to provide their own light and heat. One way that Alma extended the reach of her ministry without having to directly engage with people outside the commune was when she expanded her preaching to include radio addresses. She pioneered radio ministry with the purchase of Denver’s KPOF in 1927 and Zarephath’s WAWZ in 1931. POF members dressed in uniforms, shared provisions, were required to give up all secular occupations and ate their meals together. The meals they ate were vegetarian, because “Christ had paid the price of redemption and there was no necessity for continuing to propagate the curse by shedding the blood of animals and eating their flesh” (*Story* 3:371-2). She preached a diet of vegetarianism, based on beliefs espoused in her 1939 book *Why I Do Not Eat Meat*. While not all branches of the POF

practiced communal living like that found in Zarephath, Alma had control over all extensions of her ministry. She involved herself in the most routine decisions being made at various branches and she was unafraid to dismiss any member who presented road blocks to her plan (Stanley, *Feminist* 117). Her two sons and their children helped with her responsibilities, and Arthur took over leadership of POF only after her death. She died on June 26th, 1946 at her POF headquarters in Zarephath, NJ, when she was 84. Her obituary in *The New York Times*, read:

A woman of extraordinary energy and fervor, Bishop White, often called the ‘only woman Bishop in the world’ though some editors put quotation marks around the title, had traveled thousands of miles, crossed the Atlantic fifty-eight times and held revivals in every kind of place, from mining camps to the biggest auditoriums. (21)

Alma was buried in Denver, the place where the Pillar of Fire began, between two cemetery plots where her sons would lay by her side. Likely because she and Kent had never reconciled before her death, Alma chose not to be placed next to her husband.

Conclusion

It is obvious Alma Bridwell White was determined to advance her convictions while bearing the brunt of great opposition. In her writing and in her interactions with others she was unwavering and unapologetic in the stances she assumed. To portray her as an entirely reluctant or unaware participant in any of the ideas or actions her biography unfolds is to vacate her of the autonomy she no doubt exerted. Conversely, to depict her as wholly independent and cognizant of outside (and sometimes misguided) influences is to distort her interactions with the world around her. Further, to practice selective attribution of agency based on the palatability of an individual’s words and actions is to misrepresent Alma White’s historical legacy. One of my

goals as a rhetorical scholar is to lay out the many articulations White provides by considering the context in which they were created, while still accounting for the possibility that she herself is simultaneously the producer and product of that context. In this spirit, I have discussed in this chapter her life and work in an effort not to create a perfect biography, but instead to highlight the shortcomings of past biographies and the places in White's life where I will focus most acutely in my rhetorical analysis. In the following chapter I will look to her autobiography *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire* to analyze her rhetorical strategy and goal of identity construction.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RHETORICAL PILLARS OF ALMA WHITE'S IDENTITY

At times the whole world to me was a phantom; human affections and nature's finer sensibilities were continually being outraged, and there was no balm for cruel thrusts and bleeding wounds. I was an intruder in a world of uncertainty, where the caprices of depraved human nature place on the tender chords of the heart and leave it crushed as a result of misplaced confidence and affection. But what Fortune had decreed I must endure.

—Alma White, *Story of My Life*

Reviewing the body of scholarly work which uses intersectional theory to explore individual experiences would lead one to assume that all intersectional subjects are positioned only at the intersections of multiple oppressions. These scholarly works argue that their subjects struggle at the hands of intersecting oppressive structures, and thus are forced to maneuver between various identities of subjugation. Few of these same works, however, would lead one to believe that many of the individuals they explore also, in other ways, exert privilege or power over others. Nonetheless, few individuals experience only intersecting oppressions. Rather, they continuously move between positions of privilege and oppression, of power and subjugation. Despite intersectional theories which recognize that oppression *and* privilege intersect, influence and compound each other, few scholars use this theory to explain intersecting experiences of both. Consequently, the dynamic of oppressed oppressor remains understudied. There continues to be a need to understand how individuals articulate and use these oppressed and oppressive experiences in their rhetoric. An analysis of Alma White's autobiographical works provides an opportunity to explore this question.

Alma White's autobiographical work *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*, presents an instance of an oppressed oppressor attempting to rhetorically construct her identity. Dana Anderson has analyzed autobiographies similar to White's – those which chronicle religious experiences and conversion. She argues such autobiographical narratives tell us not only about the important rhetorical strategy of identity construction, “the influencing of others through the articulation of our sense of who we are,” but also about “how identity is both a subject for these authors within their autobiographies and a rhetorical means by which they pursue aims in the world outside their text” (4). Likewise, I assume that the expression of identity in autobiography is a powerful means of persuasion. With this assumption in mind, I focus mainly on White's autobiographical works as they reveal her rhetorical construction of an intersectional self for herself and others.

This chapter will analyze White's five-volume autobiographical work *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire* using close textual analysis informed by a theory of intersectionality that accounts for oppressed and privileged identities. I first lay out her primary rhetorical objective: constructing a religious and political identity designed to temper ideological, rhetorical and religious tensions. I then discuss the rhetorical barriers and advantages which she experienced based on her reputation as a rhetor, the context in which she wrote, and the audience she engaged. Finally, I flesh out her rhetorical strategies as adapted to her goal by applying intersectional rhetorical analysis with special focus on how she maneuvers among her dominant identity positions (feminist, white supremacist, fundamentalist Christian preacher). Alma White's articulation of identity relies primarily upon her self construction as a divine being. She reconciles her conflicting roles by situating each role squarely in accordance with God.

Rhetorical Objectives

After reading *The Story of My Life* it becomes clear that White's work is meant to serve several functions, of which the most dominant is identity construction. Beyond the obvious goal for most autobiographies – to document one's life story –Alma White seeks to articulate her sense of self in *Story*. Anderson has argued that “writing might be precisely where identity *comes to be*...Banal, common, and yet a potentially powerful persuasive strategy: as long as identity remains such a given of human experience, rhetoric must be, in some sense, given to identity” (168). Identity is a rhetorical endeavor. In the same sense, Alma White's identity “comes to be” rhetorically. In other words, White's identity construction can be aptly explained using Kenneth Burke's notion of rhetoric as identification rather than persuasion. Specifically, in reconstructing the parts of her identity at odds with ideological, rhetorical and religious views of the public with which she sought to identify, White illustrates one of rhetoric's roles in human relations: to enact social cohesion.

Throughout her life White experienced a continual sense of displacement. Describing herself as “an intruder in a world of uncertainty,” Alma felt out of place in her childhood home, in Montana with her aunt Eliza, with her husband, in the Methodist Church and among secular society. When conducting a meeting once in La Porte, Colorado Alma wrote about the conception of her first autobiographical work:

I felt we were out of divine order. I prayed much of the time for clear light from the Lord, and this resulted in my decision to write my experience...The enemy had fought me desperately. At times I almost gasped for breath, and would try to pray the conviction off, but it only deepened, and I knew I should begin at once. (*Story 2*: 84)

She used her autobiography to make the complex and conflicting roles she assumed more palatable for herself and for others. Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet has written of autobiography:

The autobiographical process uses not only fact and events, but also social representations and cultural values. A tension exists between self and society, which is resolved by the narrative presentation of a unique self which can also be recognized by society. (p. 61)

Chanfrault-Duchet's and Anderson's arguments illuminate the multiple functions of identity construction at work in autobiography and in White's rhetoric. Alma discerned the tensions between her "self" and society. She recognized the perceptions that Christianity often served to thwart women's autonomy, the commonly held views that support of the KKK was unholy, and the beliefs of many that the KKK actively opposed woman's cause. She responded to these views with an autobiographical narrative designed to temper the tensions between them and her own views. In this way, articulation of identity, as Alma's *Story* is concerned, is both a goal and a rhetorical strategy. Solomon has argued that "writing an autobiography is an attempt to formulate and convey the significance and value one perceives in one's life" (354). Alma sought to bolster the coherence of her religious and political identities and in doing so achieve her more practical religious and political goals. Specifically Alma wanted to convert and maintain followers for the Pillar of Fire. The POF paid their bills with money raised by donations and proceeds from the sale of her literature only; the success of her church was tied both spiritually and monetarily to works like her autobiography. Politically, Alma's achievements were to assist in the passage of woman's suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment, and the broader realization of equality for women. Embedded in the narrative of her life were implicit arguments for supporting both these

religious and political causes. As Solomon might describe it, Alma's autobiography was oratorical as it explained "both why [she] devoted...her life to a particular type of work and how...her efforts were important to that vocation" (354). As Alma White unfolded her personal narrative, she navigated the tensions among her various roles by weaving a rhetoric of identity which maneuvered through dynamic rhetorical barriers and advantages.

Barriers and Advantages

As a rhetor, situated amidst her intersecting experiences of both privilege and oppression, Alma White faced unique rhetorical barriers and advantages ideological, religious and rhetorical in nature. I will examine all of these, starting with the ideological barriers and advantages.

Ideological Barriers & Advantages

A feminist, fundamentalist, woman preacher who sympathized with the KKK, the majority of obstacles to her religious and political goals Alma White encountered were ideological. The political and social grip of the Cult of True Womanhood remained after the 19th century an often insurmountable hindrance to any woman's aspirations to be anything more than a pure, pious, submissive participant in the domestic sphere (Welter 152). Societal attitudes prevalent during Alma's life (1862-1946) were not friendly to strong, independent women. Nor were they open to women stepping into traditionally male occupied positions, like preacher, author, or leader of a religious group. For much of her life Alma could not vote and even after the nineteenth amendment was constitutionally ratified much of the discrimination, in policy and attitude, against women remained.

Simply by virtue of being a woman, Alma faced barriers men did not face. The pillars of domesticity and submissiveness held a firm grasp over her ideological maneuverability. For

example, she was sole caretaker for her two children, who brought with their births great illness for Alma. She described herself as “invalid,” forced to be house-ridden for weeks at a time. The care of her sons and her sickly state stemming from pregnancy greatly hampered her ability not only to attend religious services, but to preach, both activities integral to her identity. Further, as a female preacher she was unique. Although she began her career as a school teacher she eventually abandoned this vocation and took up preaching, making her an oddity among her almost universally male counterparts. While “Pentecostals by the middle of the twentieth century had more women preachers than any other branch of Christianity,” the early years of the twentieth century saw women greatly outnumbered by male preachers and church leaders (Synan 191; Tucker & Liefeld 359). Most women, in fact, “accepted their inferior status as society’s and Scripture’s place for them, and they willingly filled the roles that were described as women’s work” (Tucker & Liefeld 359). Her strained relationship with Kent, perhaps, exacerbated the problem. A reporter from the *New York Times* wrote, “Between Mrs. White, who was always telling him that he was not radical enough in his teachings, and the authorities of the Church, who were always telling him he was decidedly too radical, he must have led a tormented life” (“Holy Jumpers” SM2). This description illustrates the widely held perception of proper roles for women. The reporter suggests Alma was violating her submissive role and that her husband should be the object of sympathy because of it, a view representative of those held by many in society at the time. Alma violated societal expectations as she publicly critiqued, both spiritually and ideologically, many of the traditional roles for men and women.

Also impeding her ability to construct her religious and political identity may have been two key affiliations she accrued throughout her life: with the KKK and with the Women’s Rights movement. Both of these political connections bring with them possibility of backlash from

individuals who see either organization as too controversial or radical. For example, an article entitled “Self-Named Woman Bishop Violent in Anti-Catholicity” in the *Denver Catholic Register (DCR)*, which often reported on White’s affiliation with the KKK, reads:

Mrs. Alma White, founder of the Pillar of Fire sect, who appointed herself a Bishop a few years ago and had advertised herself widely as ‘the only woman Bishop’ having as much right to the title as the editor of the *Register* would to the title of Emperor of Mars and Neptune, has been making violent attacks at Longmont against the priests and nuns of the Catholic Church and the Knights of Columbus. (Nicholas 1)

In this case, her alliance with the KKK and “violent” anti-Catholicism drew out strong public criticism of her and her religious sect.

Support such as Alma’s of women’s rights policies, which included suffrage and the ERA, also drew substantial opposition. In fact, it drew opposition from not only individuals among the larger public, but many within women’s organizations:

As early as mid-1922, groups such as the Women’s Trade Union League, the League of Women Voters, and the National Consumer’s League went on record against the proposed amendment. The Women’s Joint Congressional Committee, sponsored by twenty-one women’s organizations at its peak, lobbied against the ERA. (Stanley, *Feminist* 113)

Further, the fact that White was the leader of the only religious organization to publicly advocate for the KKK or to support the Equal Rights Amendment from its inception would suggest such affiliations were not popular (Stanley *Feminist* 6). Being affiliated with such unpopular causes likely turned many off to the rhetoric produced by White and the POF.

In addition to barriers stemming from ideological grounds, White likely enjoyed rhetorical advantage for her goals of identity construction and conversion based on ideology. Many of her beliefs became ascendant in American culture after the turn of the 20th century. Lichtman has written of the early 20th century:

Taken together, the prohibition of vice, anticommunism, conservative maternalism, evangelical Protestantism, business conservatism, racial science and containment, and the grassroots organizing of the Ku Klux Klan formed a stout defense of America's white Protestant, free enterprise civilization. (10)

At the beginning of the 20th century the rate of immigration relative to population soared to the highest rate in U.S. history and the "rates of immigration from supposedly good and assimilable immigrants from Northern Europe declined as the rates of immigration from reputedly bad and unassimilable southern and Eastern Europe drastically increased" (Donovan 5). Such trends stoked xenophobia, lending more public perception of credibility to White's stance in support of the KKK.

One cause which may have worked in Alma's favor in her goal of equality for women, even though it was not as widely popular as Protestantism or white supremacy, was the very public cause of women's rights. Though acceptance of feminist values was not widespread, the first wave movement's successes in helping to secure the enfranchisement of women served to empower women in ways Alma believed were of great importance. She writes, "the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to our Constitution has opened the door of opportunity for women, however slow the public may be to comprehend this, time will prove that placing the ballot in the hands of women records one of the greatest events in history" (Paige & Ingler

1:163-164). To be sure, Alma recognized that women's enfranchisement was only the beginning of women's struggle. Like the National Woman's Party, Alma believed that the best means of achieving equality under the law was through the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment (Stanley, *Feminist 111*). Despite the feminist work still necessary even after the passage of suffrage however, Alma most likely enjoyed an at least slightly more woman-friendly cultural terrain because of the achievement of woman's suffrage. The successes brought on by the women's rights movement and the timely cultural ascendancy of belief systems like Protestantism, Prohibitionism and White Supremacy all served to create a more rhetorically responsive climate in which Alma created her rhetoric.

Religious Barriers and Advantages

In addition to the ideological barriers and advantages, Alma experienced religious barriers and advantages to her goals of identity creation and conversion. One such barrier stemmed from Alma's primary audience. Though she secured many of her followers after preaching at various assemblies, unfortunately for her, the majority of her audience - people within the Methodist establishment - proved to be one of her greatest sources of opposition before and after she separated from the Church. Her audience was made up mainly of individuals who attended her missions, revivals and camp meetings, but who were already affiliated with the Methodist Church and/or Holiness Movement. Selling her books and periodicals at these gatherings was a main source of income for the Pillar of Fire, but in addition to selling them to followers they sold literature "door to door, in saloons, and in businesses" (Stanley *Feminist 67*). This meant that while many in her audience may have been sympathetic to evangelicalism, many would also be accustomed to their own beliefs and doctrines. If they were raised in the same Methodist upbringing Alma was, many likely held on to the beliefs

which eventually drove Alma away. They would not be used to receiving the word from a female preacher and likely held expectations for the domestic and submissive roles of women – two things Alma publicly resisted. They would not offer the validation of her position in the church, instead looking upon the POF “with an attitude of criticism” (*Story 3*: 37). Her husband was the most obvious example of this resistance to her preaching and her doctrinal beliefs: “The antagonism on his part, which was unceasing, resulted in weakening my physical vitality, undermining my work for the Lord” (White, *Story 2*: 16). While Kent’s opposition may have stemmed from more personal issues, others within Methodism “opposed Alma on three counts: her success as an evangelist, her preaching of holiness, and her sex” (Stanley, *Feminist 30*).

Alma was well-known as a preacher, and often enjoyed great attendance when she spoke. This success caused some in the Methodist establishment to speak out hostilely against her. Alma writes, “the enemy kept busy in the churches. The pastors said it was a women’s place to stay at home and look after her husband and children. They were so biased they were unable to put the right construction on anything I might say or do” (*Story 2*: 30). It also inspired one rival minister to visit “communities where [Alma] had conducted revival meetings, and succee[d] in winning a following among [her] converts – a work so subtle and deceptive it was difficult to believe he could do it” (*Story 2*: 117).

Alma White and the POF set up missions across the U.S. and abroad, so while much of her audience was already affiliated with the fundamentals of Methodism, many within her rhetorical sights had no experience whatsoever with Christianity. This may have acted, in some ways, as a rhetorical barrier to her writing. With no knowledge of her work, many of those who encountered her work could have been uninterested in who she was and in her rhetoric. They

also likely held similar views about women's roles as many within her Methodist audience probably did, views which fell in line with the societal rhetorical barriers Alma White faced.

While her strong beliefs acted as a barrier, at times they simultaneously served to strengthen the already substantial amount of religious attention she and her organization received. She was seen by many as divinely chosen. The Rev. William B. Godbey, who ordained White a Bishop, writes, "God signally put his hand on Alma and used her to launch the Pillar of Fire Church, which has astonished the world by its aggressiveness, having more missionaries than any other Church in the world in proportion to its membership, reaching out from the Atlantic to the Pacific" (*Story 1*, iii-iv). Also, it was public knowledge that Alma and the POF were steadfast in their dedication to fundamentalist Methodist doctrine. "White had stood for a purer Methodism, more like that which had been preached by the founder of that church than she claims the modern sort is" (Paige & Ingler 1: 10-11). Alma White was uncompromising in her beliefs, religious and political:

She has a way of thinking that nothing is impossible, and a disposition to act accordingly. Once possessed with a purpose to do this or that thing, once, as she says, 'getting the mind of the Lord' on any particular project, she proceeds as though nothing were against her. (Paige & Ingler 1: 37)

She made it difficult to doubt the sincerity of her conviction, even when those convictions were controversial: "That Mrs. White is sincere in her religion there is little doubt" ("Holy Jumpers" SM7). Alma publicly and wholeheartedly agreed "with the fundamentalist critique of modernism and opposed both evolution and higher criticism of the Bible, which were primary issues in the modernist/fundamentalist controversy," stances which other Wesleyan Holiness

leaders did not publicly share even though they likely agreed (Stanley *Feminist* 87). Known for standing true to her principles, preaching emphatically and leading assertively, Alma White likely enjoyed more rhetorical momentum for her written works due to her religious reputation.

Rhetorical Barriers and Advantages

Alma White's goal of constructing a religious identity may have been hindered and helped by public perceptions of the rhetorical practices she and her organization exhibited. Since her organization was so unique, in that it adopted a strict communal lifestyle and practiced unique styles of preaching and worship, public attitudes about unconventional religious practices may have caused some to see her group as a cult. "The city newspapers would often misrepresent our work. Unfavorable reports concerning other sects were published in such a way as to lead the public to believe that our society was involved" (White *Story* 3: 37). When newspapers reported specifically on the POF, they did not do so favorably. For example, one reporter described the POF as "religious hysteria" where "converts are kept in a high state of religious excitement by a conglomerate of Biblical text, sophistry, and slang...A member of the community has already been taken to the Somerset County Insane Asylum suffering from religious mania" ("How They Jump" SM2). Another reporter characterized the POF in this way: "In their methods of worship the Pillars of Fire are pretty much like the Methodists, except that they are more in the habit of working themselves up to a state of religious frenzy." The reporter continued, after hearing Alma describe a man she disliked, "Evidently when this woman disapproves of a man the only thing for him to do is to get off the earth" ("Holy Jumpers" SM7). Undoubtedly, damaging accounts like these, negative attitudes about unusual religious sects and sexist expectations placed on women presented substantial impediments to Alma White's rhetorical effectiveness.

Alma likely suffered even more because of the role she took as creator and enforcer of the doctrine which her organization practiced. Her leadership of the POF and powerful demeanor made her a controversial figure. Helen Swarth, an individual who worked with the POF for fifteen years, wrote an expose about her experience under Alma's "dictatorship" entitled *My Life in a Religious Commune* (70). Swarth described Alma as someone who "[sought] to absorb the personality of the convert into...herself, leaving nothing but a shell devoid of originality or initiative" (5). Accounts of her authoritarianism like this illustrate a discernable resistance to her style of leadership.

Another place where her rhetoric of leadership met with clear resistance is in her expression of anti-sectarian views. Alma writes,

Many deceived persons think they can affiliate with a backslidden church, that has long since broken spiritual wedlock and married the world, and still belong to the bridehood. This is a delusion of the devil. It is unreasonable and utterly impossible to support her institutions, walk in her streets, peer in at her windows and drink out of the wine cup of her fornications without being contaminated. (*Looking* 324-325)

Considering such staunch damnation of all things secular, it is understandable that tensions would arise from outside her organization. "She and her followers experienced a high degree of tension with the world around them" (Stanley, *Feminist* 66). For example, after it was made public that within the POF organization "Medicines and physicians [were] forbidden, and their only treatment for disease consist[ed] of prayer and anointing the body with oil," state of New Jersey officials stated any death due to lack of medical treatment could cause POF members to be guilty of criminal negligence or indictable on the charge of manslaughter (Holy Jumpers

SM7). Her authoritarian and anti-secular style of leadership caused controversy within and outside her organization. Such depictions likely caused some to see Alma as overbearing or unreasonable even before picking up her autobiography; they were obstacles to her rhetorical objective of identity construction.

But although she suffered a great deal of rhetorical resistance, she also enjoyed her share of rhetorical momentum. Alma White enjoyed a great deal of fame both because of her unusual role as a female leader of the POF and as a preacher. As one *Leicester Post* reporter put it, “a woman preacher is always a draw” (*Story 4*, 327). Her uniqueness went further than just that, however. A 1925 article in *The Citizen* of Brooklyn, NY succinctly described Alma’s eminence: “Not only does the founder of the above named organization bear the distinction of being the only woman in the world to bear the title of bishop, but she is a noted evangelist, and educator, editor, composer, financier” (Paige & Ingler 2, 42). Her leadership skills were noted as astute. A reporter from the *Sunday Times* claimed that a conversation with the world renown Alma White would “likely cause an ordinary man to sit up and take notice, for Mrs. White’s life and achievements are comparable to the best efforts of many of the world’s greatest organizers and builders” (Paige and Ingler 1, 21). Though she experienced her share of criticism, she was also seen by many as a competent preacher and leader. Her demeanor and style of preaching inspired colorful depictions of her. Described as “the world’s greatest woman preacher,” “a Cromwell in skirts,” Alma was “almost terrifying her intense earnestness” (*Story 4*, 344; Stanley *Feminist* 1). This acclaim for her unique leadership and lively preaching likely brought attention from both those individuals simply interested in the novelty of White’s rhetoric and those already impressed with her abilities.

White's POF was often depicted and thus perceived as an outlandish and out of touch organization, but as much as these perceptions hurt her cause, they also may have helped it. What was weird to some was worth a second look to others. The same peculiar religious practices and beliefs that inspired outrage in some piqued interest in others, serving to simultaneously impede and improve her rhetorical objective of identity construction.

Identity Construction

The best way to analyze Alma White's rhetoric is by exploring how she wielded particular rhetorical tools to navigate the ideological, religious, and rhetorical barriers she faced, paying special consideration to the three dominant identity positions she assumed. I will discuss the rhetorical strategies she employed to simultaneously construct herself as a divine fundamentalist preacher, a devout advocate of women's rights, and a patriotic supporter of the KKK. To unfold the nuances of her religious and political identities, Alma White employed a collection of narratives designed to highlight her own direct, divine inspiration and combat the ideological, religious and rhetorical barriers she encountered.

Engaging Ideological Impediments

Alma approaches her ideological barriers head on by placing herself squarely within God's domain and her opponents outside of it. Alma fashions herself as a divine being through the simultaneous postures of victim and hero. She negotiates her divinity with her roles as preacher, advocate for women's rights, and sympathizer with the KKK. In doing so, one of the most prominent identities she constructs is as a divine entity of God. To do this she employs specific narratives focused on major shifting points in her life, intersections in crisis where she describes God's selection of her as his herald.

Narratives throughout her autobiography which create Alma as a divine vessel serve to address the tension between her womanhood and her decidedly “masculine” career choice. Alma uses divinity to rationalize her non-submissiveness and addresses the preacher-woman tension. Her autobiographical narratives of divine intervention serve to validate her public preaching, equipping her with gifts of divine origin to do the public work of preaching and converting. From an early age, Alma White expressed the desire to preach. Growing up in the time and place which she did, her career aspirations were quite lofty. This reality likely became much less dismal for Alma when she experienced what she described as the voice of God asking her to become a preacher. One such narrative is that of her conversion at the age of fifteen. She writes:

I was so close to the preacher that once when he made a gesture he accidentally struck me on the head. The Lord must have permitted this, for it made me feel that I would soon be in perdition...Suddenly I lost consciousness and felt I was carried away to hell...When my suffering and thirst were beyond words to describe, suddenly it flashed over me that there was still hope, that this was a momentary experience from which I could obtain deliverance...[Rev. W. B. Godbey] said, ‘Are you willing to take Jesus for your Prophet, Priest, and King?’ I assured him that this was just what I most desired. He then said, ‘Rise to your feet’... I had barely risen to my feet when my burden rolled way...After seven years as a penitent I had at last come to the end of the struggle and received the uncontainable blessing...The faces of those who had been born from above were radiant with heavenly light, and I could tell every true Christian in the house. (*Story 1*: 157-158)

In this narrative not only does God indicate to her that her soul is ready for conversion, by permitting the hand of the preacher to strike her, but she is given the ability to identify the true Christians in her midst as a result of her conversion. In short, her sense of the divine is

heightened because she is closer to God. These details serve to create White as more than just an individual working in the service of God, but as divine herself.

To further solidify her divinity, Alma offers narratives which illustrate the godlike abilities she claimed she possessed. Numerous accounts are offered of dreams she had, only to awake and find her dream was really a premonition. One such example happened when she dreamt of her sister Martha being brought into the house and laid on a couch with a white covering laid over her. She told her mother, but no one attempted to check on her sister. Soon after, Alma saw the horse her sister had been riding running toward the house, without her sister. The horse was startled and threw Martha over the bank of the Beaver Dam. Several nearby men rescued her. Alma writes:

Later, as Martha lay on a couch with a white covering over her, I thought of the dream...After this I knew that it is part of the work of the Holy Spirit to warn the children of God of things that are to come, and that calamity can be prevented. When I have understood the voice of the Spirit I have been enabled to thwart the plans of the enemy and to turn aside any attempt to defeat or hinder in the work God had given me to do.

(Story 1: 181)

Alma is characterizing herself as able to partake in divine work which others – those not chosen by the Lord - could not perform. Through metaphor she situates herself as a divine soldier on the battle ground between good and evil. Her mission entails identifying and foretelling of the evil to come, a duty which instills in her great power over those who believe in her and places her squarely in the role of hero. Her divinity justifies a break from submissiveness.

To further glorify her divine ability to identify evil around her, Alma turned to scripture. She writes:

Discernment of spirits is one of the gifts enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12:10. Not every member of the true Church is favored with this important gift, and it sometimes takes the body as a whole, in a siege of prayer, to locate people with strange spirits operating under a cloak of righteousness. ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ (*Story 5*, 427)

This claim reinforces White’s eminence by portraying her as unique, thus instilling in her even more power. She can, unlike most others either Christian or not, identify both good and evil. For those who take stock in her words, this power offers great influence. This claim is also one way Alma addresses the tension between her religious calling and the prevalent secular attitudes about women’s proper roles in society.

Her divine self creation continues throughout her work, exemplified in a comparison where she brings into her divine creation her two sons, a comparison which merges domesticity into divinity, a way to address her religious and ideological barriers. She writes:

If the reader, in the perusal of this and other volumes, will bear in mind that these two sons have a spiritual significance in the birth and development of the new movement (Pillar of Fire)...he will have the key to many mysteries concerning the church that otherwise he would never be able to understand...The mother here is a type of the church; her two sons symbolize the two works of grace operating in the church. Satan tried to destroy both the physical and the spiritual life, by the one most beloved, thus proving that a man’s foes are they of his own household (Matt. 10:36). (*Story 1*: 394)

Her comparison of herself - the mother- to the church, of her sons to the two works of grace (conversion and sanctification) and of her husband to Satan serves several functions. It aligns her (and her sons) with the divine, separates her from Satan, and aligns her husband with evil, all while setting herself up as the simultaneous hero and victim. She is the church, the hero, which will lead everyone to God's righteous path, while her husband is the satanic rival sect victimizing her by trying to discredit and take over her organization. This characterization of her husband speaks to the pressures present at the time which might view her marriage as suspect. No doubt the same roles confining her as a woman also played a part in how her relationship with her husband was perceived. To combat the idea that she was an unfit wife – not submissive, not purely domestic, separated from her husband – Alma portrayed her husband as taken with evil spirits. She also argued that no human relationship should trump one's dedication to God. She writes, "To place human relationships above God's will and word is to show that one has a false religion or none at all" (*Story 3*, 227). Both of these strategies place Alma as the victim/hero, experiencing the direct threat of and combating evil. In this battle, Alma wielded what she saw as her most powerful weapon available, her divinity.

Perhaps to the bewilderment of modern readers, White believed that the KKK was an institution beneficial to women's rights and Christianity. To address the ideologically based attitudes about the KKK and women's rights, she argued that those who did not see these values in the KKK were judging the organization on the basis of misrepresentation, that the KKK was woman's ally. She held beliefs which predisposed her to view the KKK as an ally to women. In her justification for women's rights, she argued that it was a humiliation for white women to gain suffrage after black men and that white men committed an unpardonable delinquency in allowing this to happen (*Woman's Chains*, 167-168). The simple fact that she views the enfranchisement

of black men as “delinquency on the part of man” and as an embarrassment to white women speaks to her cultural logic and offers insight into how she might see the KKK as an ally. She places herself in line with white supremacist ideology by appealing to xenophobia in the service of women’s rights and in so doing shows her perceived connection between the two.

More than just pointing to the work of the KKK that contributed to women’s causes, Alma White made claims that the KKK was designed by God to uphold Christianity, and thus Christians should strive to help causes central to the KKK. Here she presents an argument which constructs a need for true Christianity and the spiritual empowerment of women by appealing to the value of liberty:

There was a consuming fire burning in my breast, as Jeremiah said, and my pen was aflame. What else could we do but give moral support to the arm that the Lord had raised up and reached out to save us? We had no might or power to contend against a host of religious idolaters and corrupt politicians in high official positions, who sought by inquisitorial methods to destroy our liberties. To say the least, the new order with their weapons of warfare proved to be a match for them. (*Story 5: 264-265*)

Situating herself as a victim at the hand of idolaters and corrupt politicians, Alma sets up a scenario where not joining with the KKK is not an option. By aligning with the KKK, the organization which “proved to be the match” for the enemy, she allies herself with the hero – the divine hero “raised up” by the Lord. She invests in the KKK the same divinity which she invests in herself.

Perhaps because she recognized the negative reputation the KKK had and her organization would have as a result of affiliating with it, Alma provided this explanation of the POF:

We had nothing against the Jews or the colored race, against whom the [KKK] was sometimes accused of discriminating. Neither group had given our society any trouble in the work God had called us to do. While we are opposed to the mixing of white and black blood, racial prejudice was never allowed to be fostered among our constituency. Let the white race and the colored people occupy the particular spheres that God intended for them. (*Story 5*, 265)

In offering this explanation for her support of the KKK, White performs two functions. First, she tries to preempt the accusation of prejudice against her organization (and the KKK). She does so by insinuating that approval of separate but equal spheres is proof of this. This is an argument in line with the ideology of the KKK. She voices her opposition to miscegenation in the same breath as she denies racial prejudice in an attempt to wrap her xenophobia in Christian clothes and does so by using a politically charged, woman's rights idiom. Her justification of the KKK by aligning the organization with God's plan is representative of her dominant rhetorical strategy of evoking divine inspiration in times of intersectional crisis. It serves her purpose of addressing ideological barriers. Alma uses a similar strategy in the service of addressing her religious barriers as well.

Addressing Religious Obstacles

Alma brings together her own narrative and the narratives of scripture as a dominant means for addressing the religious barriers she encountered. She extends her use of the earlier

“mother” metaphor, again asserts her divinity, and addresses religious exigencies when she discusses her decision to ultimately separate from the Methodist church:

The nails were being driven, and I was slowly dying to Methodism, the ‘old Church mother,’ and all that was involved...I found in [those who occupied the pulpits and held high official positions] the same principles that existed in the hearts of those who rejected and crucified Christ...At last the cords were severed that had bound me to the dead ‘mother’...[T]he darkness had passed and the sun of righteousness was shining upon me. The heavenly hosts were participating in my joy. (*Story 2: 44-45*)

At this spiritual crossroads, Alma relies on a comparison which places her as the ultimate victim/hero. Not only is she comparing herself to Christ, in this passage, she is Christ. She is arguing that just as Christ died for the sins of his people, a part of her – that which was loyal to the now corrupt Methodist Church – must die to save Christianity. In her metaphor she is not being crucified by non-believers, by sinners, but instead by fellow Methodists, which markedly separates herself and her organization from other churches. To employ possibly the most powerful metaphor in the Christian faith, she merges her personal narrative with a core Gospel narrative (one likely very salient for her audience) and gains some rhetorical leverage for acceptance of her as a legitimate preacher woman. To be sure, Alma felt she was divinely blessed, special in the eyes of God. She used her autobiography to articulate this belief. She recognized the power of creating her image of divinity, that her “sense of self-understanding [was] a powerful means of persuasion” and she used this means to reconcile her divinity with other images of herself: as female preacher, woman’s rights advocate and white supremacist (Anderson 5).

Though Alma accepted for a time those roles which her faith, family and friends deemed appropriate for her – school teacher and minister’s wife – she did so by treating them as stepping stones to her larger religious plans. Tradition and Methodist doctrine denied Alma access to the pulpit (Stanley *Feminist*, 2). Instead of providing arguments for why Methodist doctrine was wrong and should change, she offered narrative evidence of a call from God and arguments which claimed the doctrine had long been misinterpreted. Her call from God to preach can be found throughout *Story*. For example, Alma believed that since “No provision had ever been made for women to preach in either of the two great branches of Methodism” she would settle for becoming a foreign missionary. However, “When [she] thought of this the Holy Spirit whispered, ‘You are needed in the homeland to give young people the help that you so much needed when you were seeking the Lord’” (*Story* 1, 161). So she set out to become a school teacher, taking advantage of every opportunity to preach the gospel to her pupils and their parents. She found a way to bridge the role she was forced to occupy with the one she desired to occupy.

This same approach can be found in her attempt to negotiate the traditional beliefs of her faith with her belief that men and women should be on equal footing at the pulpit. White writes about her decision to make her life’s pursuit preaching. One of her sons had taken deathly ill and according to the doctor, would not make it through the night. She writes:

His head was drawn back and his eyes were setting. My husband was desperate now, knowing of course, that he had neglected to secure medical attendance and spurned every plea that I had made while there might have been hope. As I stood looking into the face of the little one whose life was slowly ebbing away, the Lord spoke to my soul: ‘If I spare him will you devote your life to the ministry of my Word?’ Hope revived as I yielded to

the Holy Spirit's entreaty. Gradually his pulse grew stronger, and an hour and a half later he had passed the crisis for the night. (*Story Vol. 1*, 312-313)

By putting her decision in terms of fulfilling a request by God, she removes the possibility for arguing that her choice to become a preacher worked against her religious beliefs.

This same reasoning also operated to bridge the divisions she perceived between fundamentalist Methodism and the rights of women. To account for the tension between her position as a feminist and her position as a fundamentalist Christian, White turned to God for evidence. Traditionally, fundamentalist Methodism saw women as being inferior and/or subservient to men, a view at odds with a feminist ideology, and a perception White herself recognized (Stanley, *Feminist*, 1). She argued, however, that such traditions were longstanding misinterpretation of religious doctrine by corrupt leaders rather than longstanding traditions based on close adherence to scripture. She writes, “[P]olitical corruption and wire-pulling in the great ecclesiasticisms have unjustly kept [woman] from preaching the Gospel for centuries, regardless of the fact that there is no scriptural ground for doing so. The bosses in church politics are the great offenders in the sight of God” (*Story 1st Ed*, 1943, p. 17). In short, if a man were a true Christian, he would not keep women from preaching, he would see it as woman's duty. By placing blame on those mishandling Christian doctrine rather than the doctrine itself, White provides evidence of a need for new leadership and places God squarely on her side. This allows her to side step arguments about doctrine and keep herself, rather than a set of beliefs, as the focus of her followers.

To further articulate God's acceptance of women's equal roles, White employs narratives of Phillip the evangelist and Paul, reinforcing the idea that women were supposed to become preachers of God's word. She writes:

Phillip the evangelist had four daughters who preached, or prophesied, and there are many scriptures which show that God has called the female sex to the ministry of His Word. Paul, in writing to the Philippians, told them to help those women that labored with him in the Gospel. They did not simply entertain him and provide for his temporal needs, but they preached, prayed, exhorted, testified, and did everything they could to get people converted. (*Woman's Chains* 62)

Alma argued that anyone who offered the scripture as proof that women should not preach was practicing biblical criticism, addressing rhetorical, religious and ideological barriers. In this instance, White is using well known characters from the Bible to gain adherence to her belief that women should be granted the opportunity to spread God's word through preaching. While this strategy itself is not unique to Alma, as many suffragists like Lucretia Coffin Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Sarah and Angelina Grimke used similar appeals, her use of such a strategy in combination with her claims of divinity gives these appeals a different kind of force. She is creating for herself the space not only to preach, but to do whatever it took to cause religious conversion. Using such a tactic also serves to attach her feminist ideals to religious ideologues.

Alma was so dedicated to the argument that Methodist doctrine was being misinterpreted when it came to women's equality that she claimed it as the reason for the formation of her organization:

Seventeen years before, I was wrapped in the old ecclesiastical mantle and ready to lay my life down in sacrifice on the altar of the Methodist church; but she made no provision for me to preach the Gospel and therefore it was in the mind of God to establish a new, soul-saving institution where equal opportunities should be given to both men and women to enter the ministry. (*Story 2: 363-364*)

In her assessment of the situation, she was given no choice but to separate from the church, because it had lost its way. “There [could] be no fellowship between light and darkness, righteousness and unrighteousness” because those who clung to the old ecclesiastical mantle were the bitterest enemies of the cross (*Story 3: 411*). By merging her narrative with a religious pattern this rhetorical maneuver addressed the public view that as a fundamentalist female preacher she worked against Christian values and proper social roles. Her answer to this was simply: She was fulfilling God’s call, a call she suggests was gained due to her access to “the mind of God.” The religious barriers in front of her were corruptions of Christianity rather than byproducts of it.

For Alma White Christianity and feminism did not contradict each other. Instead, it was corruption of or lack of Christianity that worked against women’s rights.

Paganism has never recognized the equality of women, and it is the remains of paganism in so-called Christian lands that degrades and deprives them of their rights. Five-sixths of the population of the globe believe that women should not have equal rights with men... Wherever the light of Christianity has been diffused great reforms have been brought about, and woman has been lifted from her place of degradation to one of equality with man. (*Story 4: 239-241*)

Alma crafts the enemy of women's rights not in religion, but in those who would spurn religion. This argument not only identifies the enemy but it creates a built in need for her religious work. It gives her the validation to push religious doctrine even further in the service of women's rights. Her consecration as Bishop provides evidence for this. She believed her consecration "was the endorsement on the part of [her] constituency of [her] work as an organizer and overseer of the [POF]...It set a precedent in the authorization of woman's ministry and the removal of the handicap the female sex had been under for centuries" (*Story 4*: 208). Alma considered her consecration to be the actualization of both spiritual and feminist objectives which she believed the KKK also bolstered.

Confronting Rhetorical Road Blocks

To overcome the rhetorical barriers she faced the main strategy White employs is to set herself apart from modernists and biblical critics. The same strategy of disavowing other interpretations of scripture in regard to women's roles and religious doctrine Alma used to overcome her religious barriers also served to address her rhetorical barriers. It worked in conjunction with White's public espousal of anti-modernist views. She constructs herself as *the* credible religious source. By arguing for her interpretation of the scripture and simultaneously making the argument that it was her "business to preach the Word and not criticize it," she is attempting to suggest her interpretation was not in fact interpretation, but truth; therefore all alternative views were interpretation and thus false. After all, "the Lord had given [her] the key to the book, enabling [her] to offset any arguments of the so-called higher-critics or modernists" (*Story 3*: 175). Part of doing this meant aligning herself and her organization with God, with other entities she labeled as allies of God.

It is important to note that not only was Alma a fundamentalist Christian Bishop, but she was the founder of her own religious sect which could boast being the only religious group to publicly endorse the Ku Klux Klan at the time. The reluctance of religious groups to affiliate themselves with the KKK demonstrates how many people perceived these ideologies to be in conflict. Alma White's public avowal of the KKK, however, shows she sought to combat this perception. White accounts for the discrepancy between her roles as a good Christian and as a member of a violent white supremacist group by advancing a narrative that gave her God's approval for her xenophobic tendencies. She termed herself and the "the white robed army" the "saviors of America" in battle against "the Old World propaganda" (*Story 5: 278*). Themes of white superiority are woven into religious doctrine, just as Christianity is championed for its feminist values, so that one can justify the other. For example, White negotiates the fundamentalist/white supremacist/feminist friction by articulating her willingness to preach patriotic and biblical support of women's rights at KKK assemblies.

Too well I knew that I could not confine my messages wholly to patriotism or national and political affairs, and be true to my calling in the preaching of the Gospel and in pioneering the way for woman's liberation from ecclesiastical bondage. I therefore use every opportunity in these gatherings, with Scriptural quotations and interpretations, to point out the straight path to heaven and the sacrifice it would take to make the race.

Such diversions and instructions were gladly received by both sexes. (*Story 5, 277*)

While this passage shows Alma's sense that focusing too much on one cause would be in conflict with the other, it provides personal experience as evidence that the KKK was welcoming of each. It also shows her unwavering support of all three causes, building an argument for how all three

work together and setting herself apart from critics of women's rights, the KKK and fundamentalist Methodism.

Conclusion

When she encountered an intersectional crisis, a position where her identities/political affiliations/experiences seemed to conflict/contradict/complicate each other, Alma White inevitably turned to religion as a means of reconciliation. Her divinity allowed her to serve as the ultimate source. Whatever barrier stood in her way was no match for divine intervention. If other Methodists deviated in practice, they were laborers of evil, misinterpreting doctrine and leading their followers down an unrighteous path: and since she was invested by God with the ability to determine their true Christianity, she could not be wrong in labeling them as such. If the POF or the KKK were accused of being prejudiced in their teachings, it was not because the organizations preached racism; it was because the accusers were attempting to thwart their good work by misrepresenting the order "raised up" by the Lord to restore the human races to their rightful places. If women were not given room at the pulpit to preach, it had little to do with scripturally based roles for women; to the contrary there was nothing more unscriptural or opposed to the New Testament than discrimination against the female sex. Alma recognized the power of God's support in times of conflict. She believed there to be "many conflicting elements in preparing for Christian service; and the only possible way to succeed [was] on a scriptural basis...It [was] not within man in his fallen state to make code by which he [could] be safely guided" (*Story 4*, 394). It seems she drew from this principle in constructing her own intersectional identity in *the Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RHETORICAL PILLARS OF CONVERSION AND DEVOTION

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.

–*King James Bible*, Exod. 13.21

Alma White used her self-constructed divine identity to reconcile what many saw (and perhaps still see) as her contradictory ideological, religious and political identities. Her self-bestowed divinity gave her what she considered to be absolute and exclusive credibility, and she deployed that credibility in her autobiography to other persuasive ends. It is not uncommon for prominent religious figures to pen autobiographical narratives aimed both at constructing their identity and, at least in part, winning devoted followers of their religious beliefs.⁷ The same can be said for political figures, wishing to gain adherents to their political causes.⁸ Alma White's autobiography bridges the religious and political autobiographical categories by seeking conversion and devotion to both her religious and political doctrine. While this alone does not make her persuasive autobiography unique, her prominence during her lifetime yet obscurity today and the particular combination of religious and political doctrine she assembles – namely fundamentalist Methodism merging with feminist white supremacy – are unique. I have already

⁷ For several examples see *Grace Abounding*, which chronicles the profane to sacred journey of Baptist preacher and writer John Bunyan; *Journal*, which records the daily tribulations and illuminates the theological views of the English evangelist, theologian and cofounder of Methodism John Wesley; and *Memoirs*, which is a “reworking of the private prayer diaries...a reflective, devotional record” that “tries to make sense of a particular kind of suffering and violence within the context of American Protestant Christianity” by Abigail Abbott Bailey (Elrod 90,85).

⁸ See *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which chronicles the religious leader's transformation into a militant activist, putting forth an example of political awakening; *Eighty Years and More*, which accounts the personal and political feminist struggles of suffragist leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and *The Autobiography of Margaret Sanger* which explores the political trials and tribulations of birth control movement pioneer and founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger.

discussed White's goal and strategy of fashioning her own religious and political identity; however I have yet to discuss her use of that identity construction in the service of her other primary persuasive goals. Such a discussion will enrich the understanding of Alma White both as a person and as a rhetor by illuminating the cultural logic from which she, an oppressed oppressor, operates and by offering an analysis of how her identity construction worked in the service of her other rhetorical objectives. It will also help to explain how, for Alma White, her autobiography was an articulation and fulfillment of her Christian duty – to provide the “pillar of fire to give light by day and night.”

Beyond the goals of selling books to support her organization's activities and constructing a religious and political identity, it is clear that Alma had two other main goals in writing her autobiography: conversion and devotion of readers. Besides representing her construction of identity, Alma White's autobiographical work *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*, presents an instance of an oppressed oppressor attempting to convert and inspire devotion in her followers. Her autobiographical expression of identity is a powerful means of persuasion. Therefore, like the previous chapter, this chapter will analyze *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire* using close textual analysis informed by a theory of intersectionality that accounts for both oppressed and privileged identities. I first lay out her two secondary rhetorical objectives: converting and inspiring devotion. I then discuss barriers and advantages she experienced in pursuit of these objectives. Finally, I investigate her rhetorical strategies as adapted to her barriers and conclude that Alma White used her intersecting identities to inspire conversion and devotion by using a recurring rhetorical pattern: demonizing her opponents, appealing to fear and establishing her own exclusive divinity.

Inspiring Converted & Devoted Followers

Alma White's *Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire* operates under corresponding interests: her ambition to exhort readers in the direction of Christian conversion and her equally earnest desire to inspire the sort of devotion to those conversions exhibited by Alma herself. Ultimately, Alma White presents herself as divinely inspired, called not only to preach the gospel but also to convert and encourage devotion to her view of religion--a view of Christianity where women's equality and white supremacy restore truth and holiness to its theology.

Alma White had what Susie Cunningham Stanley describes as a "preoccupation with conversion" (*Feminist* 10). When she was young and not yet converted, she despaired and longed for religious conversion to satisfy her spirituality. She felt church membership was not enough, for herself or for others, to make a true Christian. Stanley writes, "Alma's preoccupation with conversion reflected a concern present among most Protestants of the nineteenth century... Their search, like Alma's, followed a predictable pattern, which included an awareness of personal sin and the possibility of going to hell" if not converted (*Feminist* 10). With this preoccupation in mind, it is understandable that White would assume conversion as one of the rhetorical objectives for her autobiographical work. She wanted to prevent herself and others from suffering eternal damnation. Further, Kent's abandonment and the defection of many POF members likely made White more acutely aware that other religious organizations might seek to appropriate her followers and, in her mind, doom their souls. So, while conversion was one of her goals, she also believed that devotion to one's faith must be continually renewed. Conversion could be short lived unless proper education and maintenance of one's devotion were pursued as well.

One way to understand White's rhetorical objective of maintaining the converted is to view her autobiography as a piece of devotional literature. Devotional literature includes those religious works not strictly doctrinal or theological in nature which are "intended to be used mainly for home devotion, that is, for meditation and prayer" (Freidmann and Wagner 1). Briefly, this literature served the practice of an inner rather than an external (ecclesiastical) devotion (Friedmann and Wenger 1). Rhetorical scholar Gary Kuchar discusses early modern devotional literature, specifically autobiographies. His work explores how devotional writers use particular rhetorical strategies in an effort to fashion themselves as the ideal religious subject confronting social and religious disorder through acts of devotion and self-discipline (Kuchar 6). Philosopher Paul Holmer agrees writing, "Whatever else this literature may be it is at least directed towards strengthening the private religious life and it does it by making the issues of daily life fraught with Christian significance" (Holmer 100). Upon reading her work, one quickly discovers the religiosity of nearly every aspect of White's daily life. From evaluating the demeanor of people she just met, to determining the health of her child, choosing what to eat, designating proper attire for POF members, deciding to publish a newspaper, and bringing a divorce suit against her husband, she defines and explains her decisions in terms of her devotion to God's word. One also discovers Alma's presentation of herself not just as an ideal religious subject but as divine herself. The scholarly conceptions of devotional literature aptly fit White's autobiography and thus may offer a more complete understanding of her rhetorical objectives and further illuminate her subsequent rhetorical strategy. Her autobiography, in turn, extends the scholarly conceptions of devotional literature.

Further evidence of these objectives can be found in White's own articulations of them and in her clearly stated views that followers were unable to save themselves. The official Pillar

of Fire description of her work illustrates her desires to obtain and maintain followers for the Church. She writes of *Story*:

In publishing these volumes it has been the desire of the author to place in the form of a permanent record some of the numberless incidents showing the operation of the Holy Spirit both through the life of the Founder and the activities of the Church, and also give the reader a better understanding of what it means to be a member of a soul-saving organization in the Laodicean church age with its many sects and isms. (*Story* v)

Here she articulates her desire to create both a conversional and a devotional rhetoric, a rhetoric which seeks to convert or save souls in the age of lukewarm or indifferent attitudes toward religion, and a rhetoric which aims at providing inspiration for a dedication to Christianity maintained throughout readers' daily lives. White saw evidence of the fallen church all around her and believed even those who read the Scriptures had "little conception of what it mean[t] actually to take up the cross daily and follow Christ" (*Story* 1, v). In her assessment, her work was necessary to save souls, so she sought to draw people to her holy organization and provide for them *the* model of faithful dedication in the face of adversity. Alma's son, Arthur, writes in the introduction to the fifth volume of *Story*, "Many have sought to live fully and deeply, but have left the stage with only a minor role because their trust has been in themselves rather than in divine guidance" (iii). Not only was *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire* seen by Alma White as a source of inspiration for "one to endure hardness for the cause of right" (White, *Musings*, 109). It was seen as *the* source of inspiration:

It is the desire of the author in [volume one of *Story*] to prepare the way for truths that will be contained in succeeding volumes by touching on some subjects that would

naturally lead up to them, all of which have vital connection with the history of the New Testament Church of the present time. (*Story 1: v*)

For her and the POF, this autobiographical work served as a revelation of truths--truths which only she and her divinely sanctioned organization could reveal.

Barriers and Advantages

Alma White's efforts to convert and maintain devoted followers were constrained by several major ideological and religious barriers and helped by one major rhetorical advantage. I shall examine each of the major impediments and the advantage which influenced her approach for achieving her objectives, starting with the ideological barriers.

Ideological Barriers

In addition to the ideological barriers discussed in the previous chapter that stood in the way of Alma White's own construction of identity (the expectations of the Cult of True Womanhood and her association with both the KKK and the Woman's suffrage movement), two ideological barriers likely hindered her rhetorical success in converting and maintaining devoted followers: 1) Negative perceptions in society of fundamentalism stemming largely from the secular and religious accommodation to Darwin's theory of evolution and 2) residual effects of the promiscuous audience ideograph.⁹

In 1870 fundamentalist Methodist evangelicals much like Alma White were counted among the most respected of the nation's citizens. Yet by 1920 fundamentalists found themselves in a culture that "was openly turning away from God" and where large numbers of

⁹ Ideographs signify "unique ideological commitments" serving as "prior persuasion against defiance of social norms at the moment such defiance is contemplated" (Zaeske 197).

evangelicals had become national laughing stocks (Marsden 3). Stemming primarily from the expansive social salience of evolutionism, such attitudes likely stood in the way of her attempts at converting and creating steadfast devotion in Pillar of Fire followers. The scientific community and much of the general public came to accept evolution as a fact in the years leading up to and shortly after the turn of the 20th century (Wyhe 48). Along with the emergence and subsequent ascendance of Darwin's theory of evolution came marked tensions amongst evangelical leaders over Darwinism, modernism and higher biblical criticism. Taking Darwin's theory into consideration, modernists attempted to update Christianity to match their view of science. They "denied biblical miracles and argued that God manifests himself through the social evolution of society" (Woodberry & Smith 27). Though conservatives like Alma White actively resisted these changes, "[t]he intensity of the debate over evolutionism's religious consequences should not blind us to the fact that the basic idea of natural development was beginning to influence many aspects of Western Culture" (Bowler 222). Since she fit squarely within the culturally unpopular perspective of "militantly antimodernist Protestant evangelicalism," it is no surprise that Alma was bewildered by the warm reception some religious leaders gave to evolutionism (Marsden 4). She believed the accommodation of evolution by religious figures stemmed from selfishness rather than truth:

I will never believe that my ancestors hung by their tails from any tree...Such monkeyism talk would not be dished out from the pulpits of the land if the preachers had not sold out the cause for salaries. The only hope for the home and the country is to revive the old-fashioned family altar. (Paige & Ingler 1:265)

As a self proclaimed fundamentalist interested in recruiting followers, there is little doubt she perceived not only the espousal of evolution as dangerous but indifference in the theological

debate over its validity as unacceptable. As Susie Cunningham Stanley puts it, “[Alma] plunged into the midst of the fray to vigorously attack” modernism and its espousal of evolutionist principles (*Feminist* 3). In fact, this is one reason why, according to Stanley, Alma White became allied with the KKK. She “recognized Klan members as fellow warriors in the fight against religious modernists” (*Feminist* 87).

Alma White’s fundamentalism was a liability for her due to the cultural climate of the time. The same can be said for her rhetorically powerful and gendered positions as leader of an organization and as preacher. Her lofty rhetorical objectives created resistance for her in the face of widely held beliefs about women and their proper roles. In other words, she represented an outright disavowal of the Cult of True Womanhood (CTW), a dynamic discussed in the previous chapter. However, one specific pillar of the CTW likely stood out as the biggest hurdle for her particular goals of conversion and devotion: the pillar of submissiveness. The fact that she occupied positions of great rhetorical power was objectionable for many, but the fact that those powerful positions afforded her influence over men was even more in conflict with societal norms. For a woman to speak to and thereby have influence over an audience of both men and women - something a leader of a prominent religious organization and preacher seeking conversion and devotion would do on a daily basis - was seen as shirking the pillar of submissiveness. It was seen as speaking to a “promiscuous audience”:

Grounded in deeply-rooted myths about the irrationality and seductive powers of the female sex, the prohibition against addressing “promiscuous audiences” reinforced early nineteenth-century conceptions of woman’s sphere and became a puissant weapon in the hands of traditionalists –secular and religious alike – who sought to keep women off the platform. (Zaeske 192)

Though the use of the label “promiscuous audience” fell out of favor after the 1850s, the social taboo attached to a woman exerting persuasive power over men lasted much longer (Zaeske 204). This cultural ideograph marked a belief that “[b]y attempting to persuade directly” a woman “would lose her genuine means of power – indirect, delicate, charming female influence – because a ‘promiscuous’ woman was neither moral, delicate, nor charming” (Zaeske 195). As one oppositional Methodist preacher put it, “women [were] responsible for all of the crimes of the ages, from the sin of the Mother Eve down to the present generation” and thus could not be trusted as rhetors (*Story 2*: 79). In fact, the pillar of submissiveness was so powerful it almost kept Alma from becoming a preacher all together. Stanley argues that because Alma was dissuaded by negative attitudes toward women in the ministry, “[she] was among the many women during the late nineteenth century who initially set aside their calling to preach” for more culturally appropriate roles (*Feminist 12*).

Religious Barriers

On top of Darwinism’s ascendance and her tension with the CTW, the strong anti-secularist views she held, her restrictive doctrine and the fact that the POF was a new religious sect among many served as added layers of resistance--religious barriers to her rhetoric of conversion and devotion. Not only would a strong stance against anything secular create an automatic disadvantage for fostering the political and social change she sought - because it calls for Alma and her followers to break ties with their secular worlds, shutting down avenues to which her competitors (religious and secular) would have had access - it put off individuals who otherwise were sympathetic to her causes. She writes of hundreds who had been converted, had “their hearts transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit” but were daunted by the requirement to sacrifice their secular lives:

Many persons had come to us who knew but little of the rugged way of the Cross. They had not counted the cost. They wanted the flare of the trumpets and to mingle with the throngs. They loved the spectacular and delighted in being seen and heard. Now another time of sowing had come in which they would have to participate if they continued to make progress. This would mean to enter new fields of labor where greater sacrifices must be made. (*Story 3: 17*)

To give up one's entire lot of worldly possessions and break ties with secular friends and family was inevitably a shock for many and likely a deterrent for both those who wanted to convert but were not ready to make such a drastic change or were already converted yet were unaware of how devoted they must be.

Alma's stance of complete antiseccularism stemmed from the strict religious doctrine she constructed for those affiliated with the Pillar of Fire organization, a doctrine which placed her at the center, a doctrine which likely led many to turn away from her church. According to Helen Swarth, an estranged member of the POF, each member "must be in absolute obedience to the Bishop 'as unto the Lord.' Since 'rules are ordained of God' we were to be absolutely 'subject to the powers over us!' So our lives were of 'poverty, chastity, and obedience'" (Swarth 17). Her doctrine was so strict, in December of 1920, Reverend Thomas A. Goode, a former member of the POF, filed suit against Alma White and other POF leaders for alienating the affections of his wife. His case cited that Alma White:

[A]cquires and maintains a hypnotic influence over the members of the organization and keeps them in absolute subjection by threats that through her prayers she will call down flames of fire upon them. That she prevents her followers from leaving the organization

by telling them their souls will be damned and they will go to hell if they desert her. That she discourages marriages and prohibits husbands and wives to live together as such.

That she discourages the birth of children. (Minister 1)

Her doctrine, as it was carried out in religious services, was reported as being “rabid” and “vituperative” (Denver 5). One reporter from the *Attleboro Sun* of Massachusetts writes of a service he attended:

[A] description can hardly do justice to the affair. One has to go and see for himself in order to realize the extent to which enthusiasm in the guise of religion can be carried...Men dance up and down in their chairs, wave their hands wildly in the air, scream at the top of their voices, kick their heels together and jump about the stage.

(Exciting)

Accounts by reporters, former followers and outsiders show that in many cases, depictions of White and her harsh doctrine or the doctrine itself functioned to repel followers rather than attract them.

Given the uneasiness apparent in reactions to White’s antiseccularism and strict doctrine, the relative infancy of her organization served to further impede her objectives of conversion and devotion. Alma White claimed her organization was founded on the principles of restoring the holiness doctrine and returning to Primitive Methodism, stating: “I am not advocating a new religion. It is the old-time religion” (Woman). Still, separation from the official church meant she was essentially asking people to leave the church of their family, the church of tradition to join this brand new, small, relatively unknown organization. Even Alma discerned the perception that the POF was seen by many as too new to take seriously. In 1937, a reporter

from the New York *Herald-Tribune* recounts her reaction to such sentiments: “[S]o far as she was concerned, her church had now come of age, and would no longer submit patiently to the smiles and sniggers of ungodly city dwellers” (Paige and Ingler 2: 193). Further, “[organizing] a separate religious group placed Alma among the ranks of the ‘come outers.’ Her separation from the Methodist Episcopal church mirrored a national pattern” (Stanley, *Feminist* 46). In the years between 1893 and 1907, just the Wesleyan/Holiness movement alone yielded at least twenty-five ‘come outer’ sects. Alma White not only had to argue that her organization was worth leaving the established doctrine of the official Methodist Church but she had to do so in a way that would stand out from the host of other similar denominations that had recently also separated from the church. To make things even more difficult, newspaper accounts concerning other sects constantly associated the POF with the “unfavorable reports” (*Story* 3: 37). She had to invent new means of inspiring conversion and devotion as she went along instead of being able to use established lines of communication which the Church had used for years.

Rhetorical Advantage

Even with these ideological and religious obstacles, Alma White held one advantage: her own exemplary personification of the principles of the POF. She was the ultimate model of her doctrine. She embodied the “poverty, chastity and obedience” she expected of others, and others made note of her tireless leadership by example. A reporter from the Salisbury, North Carolina *Evening Post* writes:

Bishop White, who has passed her three score and then but is still blest with the dynamic energy of a dozen ordinary people, has built up a religious organization that astonishes the world. With a preaching itineracy that would put the Apostle Paul’s straight off the

New Testament map, she traveled some 45,000 miles last year, buying property, raising money, and urging people to conform to the ways of the Lord. She sometimes preaches twenty-one sermons a week, five on Sunday. She also edits six Pillar of Fire journals. (Paige & Inger 2:207)

Yet another reporter, this one from the New Brunswick, New Jersey *Times* describes her dedication to Christian life, even in the face of great adversity, as the stuff of miracles:

To start with nothing, even handicapped by the vigorous opposition of her husband...to say nothing of the barriers heaped in her path by a displeased faction of the Methodist Church in Denver, and to persist and eventually overcome these opponents and build an organization whose members number thousands... is a task to try the mettle of even an inspired zealot...Mrs. White's story of her life...would seem to furnish ample reason for her belief in miracles...the success with which her ventures have been crowned are, verily, as she relates the circumstances, as nearly miraculous as one may ever expect to find in modern times. (Paige and Ingler 2: 21-23).

Both descriptions depict Alma White as nothing short of the model Christian, something she called for in her followers. That she literally practiced what she preached made it more likely that would-be followers would identify in her the sort of credibility necessary to inspire both conversion to her cause and everlasting devotion to its principles.

Rhetoric of Conversion and Devotion

Much like my approach in chapter 3, I explore how Alma White rhetorically managed and manipulated the set of ideological, religious, and rhetorical barriers and advantages she faced in the service of her objectives. I will cover the rhetorical strategies she used within her

autobiography, *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*, to produce in her readers not only a transformation of the Holy Spirit but also an unrelenting allegiance to God. In order to overcome the ideological and religious barriers in her creation of her devotional rhetoric, she adopts a religious pattern of thought: She 1) separates herself from her critics, dissenters and opponents by demonizing their motives and beliefs, 2) offers foreboding descriptions of what turning away from her organization will bring, and in so doing 3) creates a need for a divinely inspired leader: herself. Alma's construction of her own religious authority in her autobiography serves as reinforcement for her other rhetorical maneuvers. She relies on this internally constructed credibility to bolster her other arguments; namely, her divinity allows her to identify and foresee good and evil where others cannot. It allows her to be uniquely and specially equipped to save souls.

Responding to Inconvenient Ideologies

Alma White responds to the cultural climate which all but embraced Darwinism and shunned fundamentalism by separating herself and the POF from her "evil" opponents and reverting back to her divinity. When the *Origin of Species* first appeared, wholesale opposition emerged amongst religious leaders, wishing to keep intact the idea of divine creation (Bowler, *Evolution* 5). This widespread opposition in clergymen was short-lived, however; in fact, "[t]he majority of religious thinkers" sought to "make an accommodation with evolutionism" (Bowler, *Evolution* 5). Considering its prominence, it may seem that White would have looked upon evolutionary theory as an opportunity in rhetorical strategy. Perhaps it could work to her advantage in achieving several of her goals religious and political: performing missionary work, obtaining women's rights and securing temperance. For example, in surveying suffrage rhetoric, which regularly employed evolutionist discourse as an advocacy tool, one might discern

that the ascendance of Darwin's evolutionary theory could work to White's favor in obtaining her suffragist goals. As Louise Michele Newman argues, white women successfully used evolutionist discourses to align themselves with white men and disassociate themselves from black women in an effort to gain ground on the suffrage front (57-58). She writes:

Blending religious conviction (the ideal of Christian evangelical benevolence) with science (social evolutionary theories) and political ideology (progressivism), white proponents of woman's rights helped create new roles for themselves that explicitly maintained the racial hierarchies that were based on the presumption that Anglo-American Protestants were culturally, as well as biologically, superior to other peoples.

(7)

Such an argument would have fit within Alma's white supremacist feminism; she believed that white Protestants were, in fact, superior.

But in order to maintain an anti-modernist fundamentalist position, she based her arguments for white supremacy not in science but in scripture. Her antimodernism powerfully influenced her affiliation with the KKK or "the patriots," as Alma often called them, who enabled her "exposition of Scriptural truths" (*Story* 5: 265). Those scriptural truths included the biblically based supremacy of the white race:

The Book of Genesis, in its account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, sons of Noah, teaches the supremacy of the white race. Ham saw the nakedness of his father, but made no effort to cover him, and a curse was pronounced upon him and his posterity... 'Cursed be Canaan [Ham]; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.'... 'God shall enlarge Japheth [the white race], and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his

servant' (Gen. 9: 25-27). This edict was imposed by a wise and just God, and should not work a hardship on the black race. It cannot be otherwise than that it should be for their good. Until the curse is lifted from the human race, the very best position that the sons of Ham could be placed in is that of servant...thus establishing white supremacy as foretold more than four thousand years ago. (*Heroes* 142)

White makes a clear move away from evolutionism but does not shy away the racial hierarchies it was used to support.

Alma White doubled down on fundamentalism when fundamentalist Christianity was being thoroughly questioned by many in society. When, in the Scopes trial of 1925, fundamentalists experienced a humiliating blow to public opinion, many withdrew from the public spotlight to build their own separate institutions (Woodberry & Smith 28). Such was the case with Alma White. White steered expressly away from accommodation to evolution as a rhetorical topos. It is not unlikely that her belief in Holy Scripture above all else proved to be the sticking point; "Alma agreed wholeheartedly with the fundamentalist critique of modernism and opposed both evolution and higher criticism of the Bible, which were primary issues in the modernist/fundamentalist controversy" (Stanley, *Feminist* 87). She denies the truth of evolutionism, shows the evils that stem from accommodating such a theory, demonizes those who practice such accommodation, and ultimately boasts her own divinity as the answer.

Instead of reframing evolutionist discourse to fit her doctrine, a rhetorical turn many other religious leaders took, Alma White denied its validity all together. In fact, she framed it as the turn toward "Satan" who was "disguised as an angel of light in the circles of religion" (Paige and Ingler 2:176). Just like the "Negro" whose "greatest asset is his simplicity of faith in the

New Testament Gospel” but who still tries to take scriptural liberties and “stretch himself beyond his measure...invariably get[ting] into trouble,” true Christians must not take liberties with scriptural interpretation or they too will suffer the same fate (*Heroes* 144-145).

She gave her audience a false choice: wallowing in the pit of despair with the evolutionists where life has no meaning, or rejoicing in the righteousness of choosing the true path – fundamentalism. For White, accommodating Christianity to evolutionism was harmful to one’s spiritual wellbeing:

The theory of evolution as taught in the schools has undermined orthodox religion and good morals. The principles of the New Testament are ignored and the result is apparent...Man’s comprehension of a Supreme Being and an all-wise Creator with attributes of love, mercy, and justice, has given him a goal for which to strive...Take away this incentive to higher life and development and let him accept the evolution theory, and you will find him floating around in the fields of biological research without bearings as to his origin or destiny, -- left to his fate with the animals. (Paige & Ingler 1:278)

White believed that accommodation to evolutionist discourses could tell people nothing new about themselves, about God.

Returning to fundamentalist roots could tell people about how to be closer to God; however, one needed the right guide. That guide was Alma White. Here she boasts her ability to see beyond the hype which was clouding the views of other church leaders, leaders who had adapted to the whims of science. The problem with religious doctrine, for White, was not that it

lacked updating. The problem was that it had been updated too much. A modern religion (in doctrine--not date of establishment, of course) is a false religion. She writes:

False religions are filling the earth; and the Gentiles in our so-called Christian nation have failed to maintain the principles of the New Testament which they once claimed to accept, believe, and teach. We have in the once orthodox pulpits the evolutionists and the modernists, who deny the miracles of the Bible and the divinity of Christ. (*Story 5*: 191)

White not only sets up a false dichotomy, but fashions a situation where choosing between the false religion and true religion cannot be done by engaging in self guided research. This, for White, is what led many religious leaders astray in the first place. It requires the right leader with the right information. This, of course, is where she steps in:

People all down the ages have tried to find out these hidden mysteries through scientific and literary research, and have utterly failed...There is no way by which the mysteries of God can reach the heart through channels of worldly wisdom, from the fact that they belong to a work wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit when conditions are met; and there is only an occasional person who will meet these conditions. (*Story 4*: 117-118)

She meets the necessary conditions. Christians have always had the answers. They have just misread them. They need an interpreter. Therefore, the only choice people have, if they seek to be true Christians, is to follow her lead, to join the Pillar of Fire.

To argue such exclusive credibility on matters religious is one thing. To do so as a woman, operating under the oppressive assumption that females are wrought with “irrationality and seductive powers,” is another (Zaeske 191). In the end, to combat the “promiscuous” charge lodged against her, Alma White uses a familiar pattern of development: demonizing her

opponents and falling back on her self-construction as divine leader. Rather than challenging the promiscuous audience obstacle head on by using flat out denial, Alma White resists the premise of submission by leveraging the other three pillars of the CTW: domesticity, piety and purity. White argues that those who deny women's rights damn not only themselves but women as well, for no "person can keep salvation without praying, testifying and trying to get others saved. Both sexes must use their tongues for God, or backslide" (*Story 5*: 285). She claims the "outstanding menace to civilization" caused by denying women a voice stems not from outside the church, but from within it (*Story 4*: 208). It can be blamed on those who claim to fight the Christian cause but are actually "aliens" to it (*Story 3*: 277-238). Any person who denies women their rights "has in him the spirit of a tyrant" and is responsible for the wrath to come at the hand of their own misinterpretation of God's word. She warns:

Rob her of her place accorded her in the pages of Holy Writ, and seven-fold revenge will be taken upon those who would become her lords and masters. Bedeck her with jewels and make her the toy of fashion, to be flattered and petted by the opposite sex, and she will break the strongest heart, wreck the home, and turn her children out motherless to ravages of sin in a godless world. Deprive her of her rights and make her the mere servant or slave of man, and a degenerate posterity will follow, capable of committing atrocities unparalleled in any period of the world's history. (*Story 4*: 239)

Those who deny woman her due rights not only "block the wheels of progress," they "give the enemy of souls an advantage which he never could have gained had woman been accorded her rights in the Church" (*Story 4*: 239, 209). Her opponents, though they claim to work in the service of God, actually work against him.

Her demonization of opponents to woman's cause is bolstered by her assumption that true Christianity recognizes woman as equal to man, and thus equally important in the battle against evil. She writes:

Wherever the light of Christianity has been diffused great reforms have been brought about, and woman has been lifted from her place of degradation to one of equality with man. (*Story* 241)

Since, according to White, her organization represents true Christianity and God only sides with truth and justice, the POF, under her divine leadership, can exclusively lead people to truth and justice. Other "Christians in name only" may think they are on the righteous path, but without the guidance of her organization they will be perpetually mistaken (*Story* 4: 230). She asks:

Can the ordinary professed Christian realize what a triumph [the distribution of POF literature] is in the pioneering of equality for the sexes and the spreading of the Gospel? In the face of the opposition to woman's ministry, what more could we do than shed light on both sexes, especially the women, who did not appreciate their gospel privileges and were unconscious of their danger. (*Story* 5: 287)

Other religious organizations, Christian in "name only," did not embrace women's equality which illustrated not only their misinterpretation of God's word but their willingness to endanger women and society because of that misinterpretation (*Story* 4: 230). For White, this serves as further evidence that she and her organization were unique in their divinity.

Tackling Religious Revisions

Casting her opponents in an evil light, explaining the dire consequences of their actions and deploying the divinity she constructs at the intersection of her various identities also served as her rhetorical strategies in the face of her religious barriers. Just as Alma White refused to accommodate evolutionism or the CTW's pillar of submissiveness, she refuses to accommodate secularism or fair-weather devotion to fundamentalist doctrine. Instead, she moves away from secular accommodation and toward a more authoritarian and restrictive form of fundamentalism.

As declared by Alma White herself, her organization lost members because of her antiseccularist views and her restrictive doctrine. In response to this, she paints those who left her organization because of her or who criticize her for her antiseccularist, authoritarian doctrine as duped by Satan: "Too well Satan knows that the work of the Lord cannot go forward without laborers, and his great fight is to hold them in bondage on his own territory" (*Story 3*: 15-16). This "territory" is the secular world. Those who want to leave the POF, to remain in or return to the secular world are victims of Satan's persuasion, as the secular world is Satan's tool to keep people from God. For Alma, when man permits the secular world to dictate his life, he is Satan's pawn as "he allows people to engage his time and attention when he ought to be in communion with the upper world and have a fixed purpose to do the will of God at any cost" (*Story 5*: 437-438). For Alma, dissenters and critics should be seen as evil working against her, as those who would likely thwart her goals for the POF:

The falling away of some was a part of the schooling the Lord had to give us. We were obliged to learn by sad experience that 'all that glitters is not gold,' and that when a

person breaks his covenants with God and is unrepentant he opens the door for evil spirits to enter as angels of light. (*Story 2: 207*)

She categorizes dissenters and detractors as evil spirits disguised as angels, who will wreak havoc on the POF if not removed. This is where her next strategy comes in – fear appeals.

Alma employs fear appeals, explaining to her readers the suffering they and others will experience if they do not adopt her principles. Opponents and critics of her work must atone or suffer serious consequences. They must remove themselves from the secular world as much as possible or risk furthering Satan’s goals: “There is enough to do in the service of the Lord to keep a multitude busy, without giving one’s time and strength in the service for the ungodly” (*Story 4: 299-300*). Breaking one’s covenant with the POF’s principles of Christianity, however antiseccularist or authoritarian they may seem, is tantamount to slow, self-inflicted death:

[P]eople of the people of the world, who are in hot pursuit of riches, fame, and pleasures, and in their attempt to gain these often succeed in the destruction of their own bodies as well as their souls! The graveyards are filled with suicides who are not counted as such. (*Story 4: 118*)

Her readers can submit to a life of slavery, of servitude to Satan and the secular world, or they can enjoy “freedom by obedience and faith in God” (*Story 3: 13*). She expresses her hope that those people the POF tries to befriend “will take warning, without having to go through a fearful ordeal in trying to carry out their own selfish purposes,” but waiting is not an option where souls are at stake; in fact, it is a sign of Satan’s sway (*Story 5: 119*): “The tendency of fallen human nature is to put off doing things after the path of duty has been made clear...No one knows what a day may bring forth, and to put off things that should be attended to today may forecast

disaster” (*Story 5*: 424). Each individual case is perilous since we do not know when we leave this world. This should “weigh heavily on every honest and thoughtful person” (*Story 5*: 437). It should also weigh heavily on the mind of transgressors that their actions affect not only themselves. White argues that if you fail to live up to her doctrine, it does not just hurt you and your chances for salvation. It hurts everyone in the POF. “There can be no such thing as perfect unity” when everyone is not disciplined because “when one member suffers so does the whole body” (*Story 3*: 47, 296).

Within her foreboding descriptions of fates to be suffered by dissenters, opponents, critics and “Christians in name only,” she establishes a need for divine leadership that only she can satisfy, the necessity for an organization of the kind that only the POF is. Perhaps to combat the obstacle placed in front of her due to the relative newness of her organization and the prevalence of rival sects, Alma White uses her one rhetorical advantage to her favor. She provides herself as evidence. She shows her own enactment of the doctrine the Church says they stand for but actually has strayed from in recent years, effectively highlighting in herself and the POF what the established Methodist Church lacks: “Those who devote their lives to the cause of Christ [must] be willing to live under misrepresentation or in obscurity until God sees fit to vindicate them” (*Story 4*: 97). Alma White understood that it may be difficult for new members to accept her as God’s vessel, that misrepresentations and misunderstandings of the POF will happen, but she ensures them that justice will prevail. The true Christians will be revealed and the false religions uncovered:

Many professed Christians have feasted when they should be fasting and yielded to sleep when they should have been watching. People who lead soft and indulgent lives can never win spiritual victories, for at the time of greatest peril they will be overcome by the

flesh. In these last days multitudes of professed Christians are self indulgent, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. (*Story 3: 112*)

She separated herself not only from other religions but other Christian faiths, other sects which had been linked to her organization. This separation rested on not only her articulation of the differences between the POF and these other religions, but in the actual formation of the POF as a separate entity. She explains her motivation for creating the POF:

For years I had to stand by and see others profit by my labors who were unwilling to bear the weight of a feather in the interests of souls. Invariably the new converts wanted to join some church, and there were always soliciting agents around to draw them to one place or another. Thus a system of proselyting was carried on that I had no power to resist. It took the grace of God to bear this and to keep a spirit of charity toward those who were thus engaged. The Lord used it to show me that there could be no means of defense without a new organization. (*Story 2: 181*)

Her organization was sanctioned by the Lord, it fulfilled the need she manufactures in her descriptions of what will be without conversion and devotion.

God has commanded the Pillar of Fire to break every yoke and to let the oppressed go free. He wants people in a position to offer themselves and their services wholly to His work, and this cannot be done without breaking with the world. (*Story 3: 14*)

Most preachers, she argues are not “spiritually courageous enough to discipline” their church members because they have a “general apathy toward those who are delinquent” (*Story 4: 230*). Such a stance, White would argue, is unacceptable. A good leader is confident, never doubting the power of God or the sanctity of their doctrine (*Story 4: 356-357*). Such confidence requires

the willingness to carry out doctrine even when it is painful, to have faith even when it is being tested like never before. For, if one has faith, if one stakes everything on God's word, "they would find everlasting arms underneath them; and though they might be severely tested a door of opportunity would soon open wide before them" (*Story 3: 34*).

Alma offers an example of just such a situation. In this case, she invests in the fracturing of her ankle her own divinity. She is willing to do what is necessary, what God tells her to do, to preserve the safety of her followers' faith.

During my stay at Zarephath I slipped in the dark on the back steps of the new building and fractured my left limb...During the time I was confined to my room some things developed to show that there were persons at Zarephath whose motives were insincere and that sooner or later there would have to be a separation. Conditions were more serious than we could comprehend, and our only safety was in unloading some who had been admitted. They were trouble-makers, causing dissension and division...Throughout the history of our institution, at intervals there had to be a sifting out of undesirable persons before further progress could be made. On this occasion it was shown that the Lord had permitted me to meet with the accident in order to bring things to a head in regard to such unworthy persons. (*Story 2: 416*)

By retelling this story, she claims that God literally broke her ankle to send her a message: Just as her ankle needed to heal, so did her church. That healing began when the "undesirable persons" who slowed POF progress were asked to leave. Though this doctrinal policy may seem harsh, it was her Christian responsibility to listen to God.

To those who criticize or question Alma for asking her followers to follow her restrictive doctrine and give up their secular lives and worldly possessions, she offers but one thing: their salvation. Since it was “impossible to conform to this world and be a chosen vessel of the Lord,” she separated herself from the secular world. She was uniquely divinely inspired, so she offered what no other church could.

Conclusion

To inspire conversion and devotion, Alma White creates what can best be considered a devotional rhetoric:

In an indirect fashion [devotional literature] serves to make one's responsibility apparent. By both blunt and artful use of language it reminds each reader that his day is too short for dawdling and too important to be consumed by trivialities. (Holmer 100)

White's *Story* clearly outlines the responsibilities of the good Christian, stressing the urgency of action. English and Rhetorical Studies scholar Peter Dorsey, who studies the rhetoric of conversion in autobiography, argues that authors of conversion literature justify their autobiographical works by assuming that everyone could benefit from the knowledge of their faithful life, that “a single life was significant because it manifested universal patterns of experience” (37). Alma White's autobiography embodies just this sort of justification. That Alma White composes a piece of devotional literature with herself as the subject is fitting for the devotional form. That she portrays herself as divine is a departure--one which is at the core of how her rhetoric is designed to convert people and inspire devotion in those already converted. Rather than a model for imitation, she is an authority. As Kenneth Burke would say, the materialization of her “religious pattern” made it such that once she “essentialized” her enemy all

“proof” henceforth [was] automatic” (*Rhetoric* 194). She separates herself from other churches and the secular world by demonizing both. She foretells of the suffering to come at the neglect of one’s Christian faith which serves as the prerequisite for her divine leadership, a divinity which she constructs. Her characterization of herself illustrates what Dorsey writes was “[a]n awareness of the operation of divine grace” which “colored the entire rhetoric of the conversion narrative and was enhanced and completed by the autobiographical act itself” (Dorsey 36). Her conversion narrative is self construction as both a strategy and an outcome. To reach her readers, Alma White deploys the cultural logic of the oppressed oppressor, a logic where there is an ever present “other” to be demonized and portrayed as powerfully oppressive, a logic that always reverts back to her divinity to justify the oppression of others. The combination of these two - the recitation of an ultimate enemy up against the ultimate force for good – is what allows for the lack of logical symmetry to be, as Burke would say, “carried on under the *slogan* of reason” (199). Each makes way for the other. That she was so successful as a preacher and leader offers evidence for the great deal of power to be found at the site of an oppressed oppressor tension.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

My aspiration for this project was to offer a more comprehensive and intersectionally complex understanding of Alma White's life and work. Focusing on her *Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*, I argued that her identity construction and rhetorical maneuvers aimed at converting and inspiring devoted followers defy one-dimensional analysis. The various identities she assumed, constructed and used toward other persuasive ends complicated, challenged, and in some ways complemented each other. In this chapter, I offer summation of the previous chapters, outline implications for the project, and discuss limitations while providing possibilities for future research.

Summary

As I argued in chapter one, little attention has been paid to Alma White, a historically unique and rhetorically significant figure. The scholarship which has analyzed her life and work is limited in that it overlooks and in some cases justifies her various political and religious stances. Susie Cunningham Stanley, for example, foregoes any discussion of White's biblically based white supremacy as a motivation for supporting the KKK but claims instead that White and the KKK shared not only "anti-Catholicism, fervent patriotism, and nativism, but also...militant opposition to modernist theology" (*Feminist* 87). It offers superficial information about her or provides little to no rhetorical analysis, like anthologies of Susan Hill Lindley and Priscilla Pope-Levison which present brief profiles of White, but no analysis. I argue for an intersectional approach to close textual analysis of her autobiography. However, I insist such an approach must use intersectional theory which recognizes the intersections of both privilege and

oppression. Much of the scholarship on intersectionality focuses only on axes of simultaneous marginalization and, in doing so, overlooks the complexity of rhetorics built at the intersections of simultaneous marginalization and privilege.

In chapter two I explored Alma White's life and career. Since many of the existing biographical works on Alma White portrayed her agency in selective and absolute terms, I argued for a more intersectional approach in the chronicling of her life and career. For example, White's support for women's equality in the church was portrayed as strong and pioneering, but her affiliation with the KKK paints her as just "a woman of her times" (Pope-Levison 139; Brown xii). Rather than glorifying or downplaying any one of the stances she took, I focused on her own articulations of them and in so doing illustrated how her life experiences cannot be accurately explained in hard and fast terms. Using her own words I offered proper contextualization for her construction of identity. I explored White's childhood and early adulthood, marriage and family, and religious, social and political work, focusing most closely on those elements of her identity which were most integral to her identity construction in her autobiography.

In chapter three I analyzed White's *The Story of My Life and the Pillar of Fire*. I argued that the intersectional identity position of oppressed oppressor is understudied; therefore, a gap in knowledge exists in how we understand individuals' articulations of simultaneously experienced positions of marginalization and privilege. My analysis looked at White's construction of her own identity as a strategy and a goal. I found that when White came upon an identity impasse, a position where her feminism, fundamentalism and white supremacy collided, she called upon divine reconciliation. Her divinity allowed her separation from the church to coincide with her portrayal of opponents as arbiters of evil. Her divinity allowed her affiliation with the KKK to

coincide with her Christian duty to restore the human races to their rightful places. Her divinity allowed her feminism to coincide with her return to New Testaments principles. In short, she touted her divinity to create connections where others saw contradiction.

Finally, in chapter four I uncovered how Alma White deploys her construction of identity to other persuasive ends. I explore her rhetorical attempts at converting and inspiring devotion in her followers. White found power at the intersections of her identities by using a recurrent pattern in her rhetoric: demonize others, warn of wrath to come and glorify herself. She fashions a devotional rhetoric which centers on a divine rather than just devout subject and as a result her autobiography simultaneously manufactures and fulfills the need for her evangelism.

The Pillar of Fire Lives On

Alma Bridwell White died on June 26th, 1946 in Zarephath, NJ of complications from arteriosclerosis at the age of 84. By the time of her death, the POF had established an international organization with “4,000 followers, 61 churches, seven schools, ten periodicals and two broadcasting stations” (“Fundamentalist” 75). Upon his mother’s death and his brother’s death shortly thereafter, Arthur White took over as the superintendent of the POF. He served in this role until his death in 1981, when his daughter Arlene Hart Lawrence assumed the position. The POF has been led by three superintendents since then: Donald Wolfram, Alma’s great nephew; Robert Dallenbach, the husband of Alma’s granddaughter; and Joseph Gross, who presently resides over the organization. The Pillar of Fire International is still headquartered in Zarephath, New Jersey and now has six congregations in the United States, four Christian schools, an accredited Christian college, three radio stations, and missions or partner ministries in India, Malawi, Liberia, Nigeria, and Costa Rica (pillar.org).

The fact that her organization still exists as an international organization today shows her legacy lived on, that her teachings still resonate with some modern audiences. However, it is noteworthy that the Pillar of Fire International website fails to mention Alma White's name anywhere in its contents. In fact, of the eight educational institutions or official POF congregations with websites, only one mentions Alma White by name, and does so to admonish past POF errors in leadership:

Bishop Alma White was the founder. It was not her initial plan to establish a new denomination but rather a missionary society to spread the gospel and the message of holiness. However, after a long struggle, she branched out to form the Pillar of Fire. Its beginning was mired in controversy as her husband was not in agreement. It eventually led to their marital separation, which was later repudiated by the Pillar of Fire leadership.* Nevertheless, she was ordained on March 16, 1902 and went on to be consecrated as the first Bishop of the Pillar of Fire. As such, she was the first woman consecrated a Bishop in America. Much talk has also arisen over her brief but significant association with the KKK, which has also been publically condemned and repented of by the POF leadership with a request for full forgiveness.* Despite these and other errors in its history, the Lord in His grace and mercy has chosen to bless the ministry. (“History”)

The cited repudiation also fails to mention her by name:

We regret, repudiate and repent, and ask for full forgiveness for anything in our past that is short of Christian standards based on God's Word, following Jesus' model prayer that teaches us to ever pray and forgive us our sins for we also forgive everyone that is

indebted to us. (Luke 11:4) We specifically regret mistakes and bad judgement by previous generations or anyone in our membership of the past. (Parsons)

This, coupled with the exclusion of her name altogether on most of the other websites, seems to suggest that on some level the new POF wants to separate themselves from the POF of Alma White. Considering her proclamation that in matters of the POF “[her] word [was] final,” these exclusions would be viewed by Alma as failures of devotion (Paige & Ingler 2: 73).

So what went rhetorically wrong with Alma White’s autobiographical attempt at constructing identity and inspiring a devoted following? Was calling upon ultimate divinity as the overarching strategy the problem—linking the religion too much to herself and not enough to the ideas? For if her divinity is doubted in the minds of her audience, her entire rhetorical tapestry unravels. Or, perhaps it has to do with her unwillingness to compromise, to sacrifice in the name of some transcendent cause. It seems that many rhetors have the potential to be oppressed oppressors, but for the sake of the cause they seek the key is to minimize their oppressor rhetoric—to make visible their sacrifices for a broader cause. For example, Lucy Stone and the American Woman Suffrage Association recognized the risk for failure if the Fifteenth Amendment included woman’s suffrage and so did not seek to include it, instead, portraying the amendment as a step in the right direction. Since sacrifice was a key part of the religious pattern of thought Alma White put forth – the good Christian must sacrifice - maybe the problem with her divinity strategy is that she does not enact the sacrifice in her rhetorical maneuvers that she calls for in her followers. Knowing whether or not her rhetoric fails, or even why it fails are not the most important or interesting insights to come out of this analysis. The implications yielded from this analysis, however, are.

Implications

This project, in its contributions to intersectional theory, the history of women's rhetoric and the concept of the oppressed oppressor role has implications that extend beyond what is written on these pages. First, to employ intersectional theory in a way that is often not done – to explore rhetoric shaped at the intersection of margin and center – is to use that theoretical tool closer to its full potential. Expanding intersectionality to look at the rhetoric of oppressed oppressors not only opens the door for employing theory in ways which it is not often used, it opens up possibilities for new insights, new implications to be discerned. We learn how various identities (marginalized and privileged) interact with each other to fundamentally change how both are experienced. We learn how rhetoric created at those intersections of those experiences works to reconcile, justify and compliment. We gain more insight into what it means to articulate an oppressed oppressor identity and use that articulation toward persuasive ends.

Second, studying the rhetoric of women at a time when women's rhetoric still encountered significant obstacles based just on womanhood offers a more detailed history of the rhetorical tradition as it helps to remedy the shortage of attention to religious rhetoric, autobiographical rhetoric and woman's rights rhetoric after suffrage and before the second wave. This analysis offers the study of a kind of artifact that has not been studied as often as others (speeches and conduct books). It speaks to the specific strategies Alma White used in the face of gendered rhetorical barriers, but it also offers an example of a rhetorical act of resistance to and compliance with oppressive forces within the history of rhetoric.

Finally, this analysis yields important implications for demystifying the complexities of the oppressed oppressor rhetoric. The contradictions many see at work in White's work are a

result of looking past rather than within her cultural logic. Scholars like Stanley, Pope-Levison, and Lindley clearly recognize contradictions but do not necessarily examine how Alma White reconciles them. While an intersectional analysis of an oppressed oppressor's rhetoric does not condone the claims made within it, it also does not condemn them. Instead, this analysis represents the importance of recognizing that rhetors often exhibit simultaneous confrontation of and collusion with oppressive forces, but that wholesale condemnation or approval of either is often misguided and unproductive. It explains how Alma's reconciliation of her identities does not simply involve leveraging the "oppressor" parts of her identity but aiming to transcend all identities with divinity.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

This rhetorical analysis is limited, first by its focus on only one of Alma's more than 35 published books and periodicals. Although analyzing but one of White's many texts allows for a more close textual reading, it prohibits the analysis of the breadth of topics which her work covered. An analysis of each of her works would yield even more insight into her strongly held beliefs, her opposition to others and the outside world. For example, her work *Why I do Not Eat Meat* might lend further understanding to her process of biblical interpretation. Her work *The Titanic Tragedy – God Speaking to the Nations* could offer further comprehension of how Alma saw God's divine communication with her in both the smallest and biggest events in the lives of herself and others. Her collections of sermons, *Radio Sermons and Lectures* and *Short Sermons* would give insight to how she put her rhetorics of identity construction, conversion and devotion to work at the pulpit. Alma White was a prolific writer, and looking at her autobiographical rhetoric is an excellent place to start the process of exploring her larger body of work because of

its length and its representation as a key source for her construction of an oppressed oppressor identity.

Yet another limitation of this work is that I focus on just one person, one subject at the intersection of privilege and oppression. In order to understand the cultural logic of the oppressed oppressor, it would be necessary to explore the rhetoric of a multitude of individuals. For example, just looking to the work of White suffragists and comparing their rhetorical maneuvers of identity construction and political conversion with Alma's would allow a broader understanding of this dynamic to surface. Composing a collection of analyses of oppressed oppressor rhetoric and drawing conclusions about the patterns that emerge would provide a context for how these rhetorics operate more generally. For example, it would be possible to analyze the rhetoric of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton from this intersectional perspective, to find their rhetorical posturing and maneuvering similar to White's: their lack of willingness to sacrifice rhetorical stances in the name of a larger cause.

Finally, a more thorough exploration of the schism within Methodism at the time would likely uncover further discoveries in terms of White's motivations behind the POF principles and her conflicts with the established church and other sects. A more detailed account of the accommodations made by religious leaders to Darwinism and evolution would more richly contextualize the response Alma had to her opponents and the secular world around her. A more in-depth discussion of the doctrinal disputes over biblical inerrancy and speaking in tongues, for example, would set up a more nuanced understanding for why Alma chose to fight the scriptural battles she fought, providing further context for the reactions she had to her opposition. In other words, this work is limited because it focuses mainly on reactions to White's rhetoric in newspapers. Future research would look more closely at the rhetoric of her competitors.

Conclusion

This analysis of Alma White's life and autobiographical works takes one step toward solving the lack of coverage her rhetorical legacy experienced previously. It provides an example for how the application of intersectional theory can usefully explore rhetoric created at the site of both privilege and oppression. It offers a specific instance of the cultural logic of an oppressed oppressor unfolding and in so doing demonstrates how a rhetoric of empowerment can concurrently act as a rhetoric of oppression. Alma White, the first female Bishop in the United States, early advocate for the ERA, proud public supporter of the KKK stands as evidence that rhetorical theories are individual endeavors built at the intersections of our unique identities.

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