Expanding Religious Crowds: Containment and Openness in the American Megachurch

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Sanctuary for a Crowd

You are in a vast space. You sit high up in the centre of a row of fold down seating, upholstered in a woven teal coloured fabric. Underneath your feet yellow curlicues run through the blue carpet. The air conditioned atmosphere is cool, pricking your skin, but you are comfortable, and wait expectantly. Surrounding you, in front and behind, are large rectangular sections of the same cambered seating which descends onto an immense floor. You look down upon an oval shaped auditorium into which many thousands of bodies are gathering. The seats face towards a wide, brightly lit stage. Above, the ceiling is painted black and is hung with a grid of 16 undulating mesh screens that resemble luminescent waves. These provide a focal point for a complex lighting system, hundreds of light fixtures are arrayed on motorised lighting trusses, multi coloured LEDS and rings of downlighters conjure a spectacular night sky. At the front of this cavernous space known intimately as the ‘Sanctuary’, above the stalls containing spaces for 250 choristers, three gigantic Diatronics LED screens curve around the stage, advertising a roster of events, including water baptism, a movie night and ‘Spark’, a marriage conference. Information appears on ways to donate via text, online and an app. A black backdrop is punctuated with an array of small white lights, echoing a celestial body. At a midpoint on the floor, a raised platform houses high definition broadcast cameras with telephoto lenses, connected to the control room in the Media Suite on the fifth floor. Rows of rigging, vast subwoofers and amps sit ready to project the voice of the Pastor when he takes the stage. Below, volunteers with badges stationed at fire exits stand ready to welcome and assist. The gridded areas of seating form curved sight lines all perspectivally gathered onto the vanishing point where the smiling Pastor will stand. Behind this centre point, upon which the cameras are trained for broadcast, an 11 foot wide golden sculpture of the globe slowly rotates. The congregation rises steeply around this spherical configuration, the multiple bodies enclosed within a fabulous construction. Soon, the lights will blaze across the auditorium and the crowd will rise to their feet. The speakers, channelling powerful upbeat anthems, will cause the floor to tremble and produce a rhythmic vibration inside your chest. A collective upsurge of feeling will swell as the congregants sing, dance and lift their hands. You will hear repeatedly that
you are not alone, that God is on your side, that whatever struggles you face you will have breakthrough. The dawning truth of the message, the emotional charge of it materializes as a warmth in your chest and a burning sensation behind your eyes. You are fully open, you have seen, you believe...

Figure 1. Lakewood Megachurch, Houston, Texas. 2013 (Image credit: ToBeDaniel: commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38716905)

Towards the back of the stage where a compelling and transformational message is preached weekly, stands a three-dimensional rendering of the globe, a hollow sphere formed of gold longitudinal and latitudinal lines upon which the continents are rendered. This sphere is both an open and closed entity. The globe represents both the racial diversity of Lakewood, a nondenominational Evangelical megachurch in Houston, Texas, and the global focus of Evangelicalism. At Lakewood, North America's largest church, 52,000 people attend on a weekly basis (Zaimov 2016) and millions more access the services via TV broadcast, online and podcasts from around the world. One of the central tenets of Evangelicalism, a world-wide, rapidly spreading trans-denominational form of Protestant Christianity, is conversionism (Bebbington 1993), a fundamental belief in the spreading of the gospel to the ends of the earth through telling others the ‘good news’ of Jesus Christ. From 1970 to 2019, the global growth of the number of Evangelicals grew at a faster rate than Islam, outstripping the global population growth (110%) at 235% (cf. “Status” 2019). There are approximately 600 million Evangelicals represented by the World Evangelical Alliance, a global network of churches across 129 nations (cf. “Who We Are” 2019). The US has the largest concentration of Evangelicals: 25.4% of the population,

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mostly based in the Bible Belt, in which Lakewood is situated (cf. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” 2015). In the US megachurches, 71% of which are Evangelical according to the Hartford Institute for Religion (cf. Earls 2017) are undergoing a rapid increase in size (cf. Ellingson 2016; Maddox 2012), whilst white Evangelicalism is entangled with political conservatism: 81% of white Evangelicals voted for Trump as president in 2016, proving decisive in his success (Pulliam Bailey 2016). In the 2020 election, exit polls showed that 75% of white Evangelicals continued to vote for him (Sherwood 2020). Due to the often overt support for Republicanism amongst predominantly white Evangelical congregations, an ‘exodus’ of black evangelicals has been reported (Robertson 2018), reversing the uptick in diversity as a result of a reconciliation movement which had begun to desegregate church congregations over the last thirty years (Gilbreath 2010).

The communication of a narrative through the visual, spatial and auditory immersion of the American Evangelical megachurch creates a sense of orientation for the congregant. The authorised narrative of the ‘good news’ story creates a perception of being grounded or stabilised. Embodied affect as a result of experiencing this narrative is key to belief formation and spread. The narrative is repeatedly reinforced through intense embodied experience; compelling preaching relayed over multiple screens combines with emotive music and the vast scale of the crowd to create a charged atmosphere, enthralling worshippers. Bodily and cognitive responses to spectacle, music and persuasive rhetoric coming to create positive feelings of hope, comfort, consolation and a sense of belonging. A recent body of scholarship on the worldwide phenomenon of the Christian megachurch has been emerging over the last 10-15 years, largely quantitative and contained within the field of sociology. However, key megachurch scholar and sociologist Stephen Ellingson writes: “Despite the rapid proliferation of megachurches and their high visibility in the press, research on this phenomenon is still in its infancy.” (2016: 248) The appearance of the megachurch represents a recent but dramatic shift within Protestantism, Ellingson describing it as: “...one of the most significant changes to Christianity in the past twenty to thirty years.” (2016: 247) He considers that megachurches will continue to be a key influence within Christianity, particularly in the US, in decades to come. (2016: 263)

A small number of sociologists are beginning to consider explanations for the rise of the megachurch, including Maddox (2012), Wade (2015), Ellingson (2008; 2016) and Rakow (2015). However, there has been little scholarly evaluation of how the visual and material culture of the megachurch communicates an orienting narrative to the believer through embodied affect, proving effective within the disorientation of rapid socio-political change (Bauman 2017), contributing to the spread of Evangelicalism.1

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1 I explore this visual and material culture within my artistic practice through experimental writing, installation and performance. I utilize water, both lack and excess, as metaphor for the ever expanding
The paradoxical image of Lakewood’s golden globe, a container that is both open and bounded, will be put to work as a visual metaphor within this paper to think through scales of containment and openness within the particular expression of Evangelicalism at Lakewood, from the individual, to the collective, to the global. How do the visual, material and spatial conditions at the Texan megachurch intensify the Evangelical narrative, impelling the embodied subject, and how does the concomitant sense of dis/orientation produce, sustain and spread Evangelical belief globally? At the heart of these scales of belonging are paradoxical and problematic separations of inside and outside, containment and spread, and the holy and unholy.

The standard definition of the megachurch is typically a Protestant Christian church with 2,000 or more congregants in weekly attendance (Thumma 1996; Thumma and Travis 2007; Ellingson 2007). Further clarification by scholars state that American megachurches tend towards a combination of orthodox Evangelical and socially and politically conservative theologies (Ellingson 2016: 247). Additionally, through TV and internet broadcasting, these churches utilise cutting edge audio-visual technologies (Klaver 2015; Wade 2016) to communicate and disseminate practical and therapeutic preaching (Rakow 2013 and 2015), centring on positive thinking rather than Biblical exegesis. Lee and Sinitiere (2009), Maddox (2012) and Sanders (2014) draw parallels with the emergence of a therapeutic culture in America and the shift in church culture towards a seeker oriented, pastoral, non-liturgical or ‘feel good’ model. Religious scholar Katja Rakow considers that “[...] the therapeutic discourse strongly influences notions of self and personhood in contemporary America.” (2015: 229) Focusing on Joel Osteen (Lakewood’s celebrity pastor, televangelist and best-selling author), Rakow argues that with the emergence of the dominance of the self as a value and the surrounding ideas of autonomy, individuality, liberty, fulfilment and choice in contemporary society, Osteen offers another route to self-development.
The entanglement of American megachurch culture with consumer capitalism, the tendency to replicate its socio-political context by prioritizing comfort and choice, has been well documented (Twitchell 2004; Connolly 2008; Maddox 2012; Sanders 2014 et al.). Megachurches tend towards non-denominationalism, allowing religious consumers the freedom not to be tied to a particular religious ‘brand’ within the Christian marketplace. Within the current Western secularized context religion is an achieved or acquired status rather than an ascribed one, and as a choice becomes a tool in individual quest for self-development (Ellingson 2016: 253). Business and marketing strategies are employed by megachurch leadership. American megachurches are frequently housed within buildings that look and operate in a similar fashion to shopping malls (Sanders 2014), with a wide range of free services and products for purchase. Evangelical megachurches are effective in using secular tools and strategies to attract those who are religious seekers, appearing anti-institutional, therapeutic and contemporary, easing the transition into religious community, whilst retaining the core message of salvation.

The increase in numbers and scales of megachurches has occurred largely in North America, South Korea and Southeast Asia, but the phenomenon is a truly global one and
the expansion continues apace.\(^2\) Research to date has tended to be focused on the US megachurch, alongside a few significant studies based in Australia (Hey 2013) and Asia (Goh 2005). In the US, the number of megachurches has grown from approximately 50 in 1970 (Ellingson 2016) to 1343 in 2008 (Maddox 2012: 147) and is continuing to rise. For a small but significant portion of churches, the mega has become the ‘giga’ (Maddox 2012: 35). US congregations in 2010 qualified as ‘gigachurches’ (Stetzer 2010), with weekly attendance at more than 10,000. This number currently stands at 90 (cf. “American Megachurch Database” 2020). In San Salvador, the Elim Christian Mission’s weekly community is 50,000 strong. Lagos, in Nigeria, is host to numerous megachurches, the largest being Deeper Life Ministry with 65,000 attendees, whilst the Redeemed Church of God has formed its own city campus around a vast metal structure within which 50,000 bodies are galvanized weekly to give glory to God (Maclean 2017). The largest of all megachurches is in Seoul, South Korea. The services of Yoido Full Gospel Church meet the spiritual needs of 480,000 each week and the membership currently stands at 830,000 (Bird 2018). Many of these churches have satellite sites and/or sister churches within their network – live preaching is screened from the central campus to the subsidiary sites, which explains the gargantuan numbers in relation to physical capacity.

Likewise, literary theorist Robbie B.H. Goh points out the tendency of megachurches to constantly highlight their growth and to link this to greatness. A repeated foregrounding of size (its congregation, site, networks, scale of activities, potential for future growth) strengthens the authority of the church and acts as an index of God’s presence and favour. Goh writes:

> The performance of this ambition of “greatness,” enacted in a number of ways and in different media, coalesces into an experience of massive solidity and corporeality, which offers a reassuring presence as a supplement to (if not in lieu of) the experience of the presence of the invisible God. (2008: 296)

The visual repetition of a spread of bodies both live and on screen produces a seemingly infinite crowd, perceived as a sign of authorization, a validity. It is also, for Goh, an ‘inevitability’, a weighty and substantial body that will dominate and expand.\(^3\) He suggests the crowd also supplements or creates the experience of the Holy Spirit, that immaterial ‘other’ that may, or may not, depending on our belief orientation, be there.

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\(^2\) See Bird’s quantitative data on megachurches per continent in Global Megachurches by Leadership Network (2019).

\(^3\) It is important to note, however, that the crowd does not consist entirely of new converts. Whilst currently more protestant Christians in the US belong to megachurches than any other type of church (Einstein 2008), this has caused mid-sized churches to reduce in size (Thumma and Bird 2008).
1. The Believer: Belief as a Bodily Orientation

At Lakewood, the individual congregant, whatever their vantage point in the Sanctuary, faces a compelling image – the preacher, his body and voice instrumentalised toward the communication of a heartfelt message, superimposed onto the nations and coordinates of the golden globe which slowly rotates behind him. How is this image perceived and materialised within the body of the believer? The globe, as a map and orientation device, despite its slow rotation depicts an enduring stable ground. As the preacher re-tells the narrative of creation, fall, redemption and second coming, the narrative materialises as a foundational stratum within this stable ground. He channels, through performative vocalization and gesture, a seemingly global truth. Within the body of the believer for whom the phrase ‘I was lost, but now am found’ holds true, this is felt as deep comfort. The ritualistic telling and re-telling of this story of stories becomes a world (re)making certainty for the believer. The preacher, perceived as a oneness with the global image, is seen as the speaker who tells the truth of the world, he becomes the world’s mouthpiece. Within the body of the individual who believes, this world-making narrative materialises as a new reality.

Narrative accounts for events by organising them into a coherent structure. It appears in the form of a series of spaces in which we move through time, spaces of beginnings, middles and endings. In this temporal rendering of space, narrative arranges reality into a navigable form. Historian Hayden White views the translation of knowing into telling as a “universal structuring of meaning,” (1980: 7) For philosopher Roland Barthes, narrative “is simply there like life itself […] international, transhistorical, transcultural.” (1977: 79) Cultural theorist Mieke Bal defines narrative widely; it can be communicated via a broad spectrum of media within culture. These varied cultural forms can then to be interpreted and understood by a reader. Bal writes:

A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (‘tells’ the reader) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sounds, buildings, or a combination thereof (2009: 5).

In considering how narrative might represent reality, White describes a narrativising representation (narrative considered linguistically here) as: “A discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story.” (1980: 7) White particularizes narrativising as a form of feigning, an illusory closing of the ‘gap’ between events and their telling. However, White suggests that narrativising entails a separation between world and word. White’s ‘feigning’ stops short of accounting for the impact of that telling where the real and its narrativisation become inextricably enmeshed in a feedback loop. Telling is not an abstract, immaterial phenomenon. It alters lived reality, materializing its fabric, shaping and reshaping it. For linguist Émile Benveniste, language makes the real: “The situation inherent in the practice of language, namely that of exchange and dialogue, confers a double function on the act of discourse; for the speaker it represents reality, for
the hearer it recreates that reality.” (1962: 22) Language, channelled through bodily matter, animated powerfully through the voice and the ears that receive the sound waves produced, has embodied impact. This embodied affect mingles with perception, engendering new belief. In the light of belief responsive behaviour and action create material change. Language forms a dynamic interplay with bodies that speak, listen and act. Political theorist William E. Connolly points to the importance of developing a philosophy of language that recognizes the multiplicity of this phenomenon. For Connolly, intersensory perception, formed by a weaving together of the senses, is neither entirely separate nor reducible to language. The senses and language are enfolded in a way that allows each to exceed the other in experience: “the sense being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the sense.” (Connolly 2010: 182)

Connolly writes:

Imbrications between embodiment, language, disposition, perception, and mood are always in operation. A philosophy of language that ignores these essential connections may appear precise and rigorous, but it does so by missing circuits of inter-involvement through which perception is organized. (2010: 183)

This imbrication of language, perception and the body is key to the inculcation of ideas and belief. Connolly describes the kind of belief that arises from and produces embodied affect, becoming deep rooted, remaining unaltered by new evidence and resisting transformation by rationality or reflection:

Belief at this level touches, for instance, the tightening of the gut, coldness of the skin, contraction of the pupils, and hunching of the back that occur when a judgement or faith in which you are deeply invested is contested, ridiculed, ruled illegal or punished more severely yet. It also touches those feelings of abundance and joy that emerge whenever we sense the surplus of life over the structure of our identities. (2010: 196)

This folding in of language, body and affect produces an identity forming reality for the individual who listens, believes and recreates this reality in new tellings. To convert is literally to turn (the Latin conversion means “to turn”), enacting a spatial and embodied metaphor (Simon 2018: 119), towards a ‘nomos’, a meaningful, orienting construction of reality (Berger 1967). To convert is to face the preacher, standing in front of the world and speaking it as it is meant to be heard. This is paramount for the Evangelical (meaning ‘good news’), in whom the telling cements identity. The foundation narrative of creation, fall, resurrection, and second coming, is, arguably, most ardently repeated and adhered to within Evangelicalism, comparative to other expressions of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ, the ‘Corner Stone’ and central figure around whom the story configures, provides a foundation upon which a religious worldview is built. The stabilizing effect of the narrativising of reality is felt as a fixing of place.

Evangelicalism’s appeal might therefore be located within its ability to orient: to offer...
coherence, stability and social order through the telling and re-telling of its narrative, a mythos where the story is understood literally. This is the consummate narrativisation of White’s ‘world speaking itself as a story’. The ‘gap’ between the telling and the world is absolutely disavowed, for the Evangelical, word and world are one (“In the beginning was the word...”). Within Evangelicalism the content of the narrative is considered paramount, the telling is merely a necessity for allowing the world to speak itself as it truly is. It is a form of literalism where the Christian narrative is sacralised and concretised. It is no longer mutable and contingent, for the believer it becomes ossified and petrified into an immovable foundation, producing a deeply embodied effect of being grounded, of being set in stone. Believer’s life stories become housed within the larger Evangelical narrative, their identity as Christian enclosing their own narratives in a ‘before I knew the truth’ and ‘now I live in the truth’. A fixity of place is engendered:

God is building a home. He’s using us all – irrespective of how we got here – in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day – a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home. (The Message Bible, Ephes. 2.19-22)

This relation between word, body and world can be further considered in relation to myth. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy asserts that myth, a story that infuses the world with meaning, has a foundational and operative power that materializes in the real, and it is a mistake to dismiss it as a fiction. What the ancient Greeks originally called muthos was a true story, a story that unveiled the true origin of the world and humankind.

Concerning the ‘myth is the myth’ Nancy writes: “it is not by chance that its modern usage in this phrase that underlies our knowledge of myth – that myth is a myth – produces in a play on words, the structure of the abyss.” (1991: 52) The collapse of the founding structure of myth, producing real world, embodied effects: we feel disoriented, lost without our structuring stories through which we represent and recreate reality. Myth is the telling of the world through linguistic construction. Nancy points to this structuring of world (cosmos – the universe as a coherent whole) through word (logos): “myth has been [...] the name for the cosmos structuring itself in logos” (1991: 49). Mythic speech not only serves to order the world, making it graspable, it also ‘binds’ the bodies of believers to it. The believer is oriented in the world. Myth comforts and stabilizes (cf. Nancy 1991: 49).

At Lakewood, North America’s preeminent pastor, celebrity, bestselling author and multi-millionaire Joel Osteen takes the stage. As always, he is smartly dressed in a dark blue suit, his diminutive stature offset by an expansive Texan warmth and a beguiling charisma. His voice, rehearsed to perfection, is familiar but carries a gentle authority. He settles us into the message with humorous anecdotes, but this jocularity is set aside to

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begin the serious business of reinforcing the shared foundations of the community once again. Lakewood’s brand of Evangelical narrative is part of the Word of Faith movement: positive thinking to acquire an abundant life. Osteen thoughtfully paces the stage, opens his arms wide, brings his hands together. He occasionally punches the air, constantly underlining his words with his gestures. At times he suddenly pauses, his cadence increasingly inflected with passionate emphasis. Congregants respond by murmuring approval, calling out, clapping, a mild neo-Pentecostalism at work in antiphonal response. Today’s message is ‘Call it in’ on the power of words to affect positive material change... “Call in health, abundance. Call in promotion, opportunity. Say what you want, not what you have. It is already happening. Don’t call in the negative.”

Figure 3. Lakewood Saturday evening service, Joel Osteen preaching on ‘Disconnect from Discord’ 3rd August 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).
He wants us to be financially blessed, to have breakthrough, to be healthy and have all that we desire. He wants this for us because God wants it. Through using a rhetorical repetition of the same persuasive phrases over and over again he embeds these truths in the bodies of believers. Osteen’s advice has a veneer of logic, but it is the emotional charge that arrests. His voice is pure affect for both speaker and listener, summoned from veins, muscles and organs, an embodied will to communicate. Towards the end of his preach Joel’s voice breaks with emotion, his chin folds up towards a mouth that contorts with the effort of holding back tears. Here is a man deeply invested in the significance of the telling. His body carries the weight of it. His brow furrows and he pauses. At this point, we are brought, through the voice and the narrative working together to create an authentic power, to a suspension of our disbelief. As individuals and a collective body we feel our conviction as an inner flood of affect, and a collective atmosphere. Lakewood’s golden globe is symbolic of both the bodily container of the congregant in which a well of emotion stirs, and the sense of orientation felt by the individual, held within the structure of a narrative, a stabilising enclosure that contains, frames and consoles. Despite an inherent individualism within the message of self-fulfilment (Rakow 2013; 2015) in joining this community of embodied belief the individual believer becomes part of something new and all consuming. But this conjoining also entails a separation from a former way of thinking and being. The impact of the good news story leads to a closing off from the life of unbelief, and a cleaving to the crowd.

2. The Crowd: Site as a Porous Container

The globe, in addition to representing the orienting effect of the ‘good news’ story within the body of the individual, also provides a frame through which to think Lakewood’s site as a container for a crowd, in particular the open and closed nature of the Sanctuary, formed of material and cultural bounds. Megachurches, through their non-denominationalism, non-threatening messages, corporate or mall type buildings and use of contemporary music, design and technology, typically exhibit low tension with the surrounding secular culture. 55% of megachurches in the US and all those outside the US are in Thumma and Travis’s (2007) category of ‘Seeker’ and ‘Charismatic/pastor-focused’ megachurch, both categories apply to Lakewood. Seeker churches (30%) represent those tailored to the unchurched, especially those alienated by traditional organized religion. Overt religious symbolism is avoided, and fundamentalist or Pentecostal approaches toned down. Sociologist George Sanders adds the words ‘corporate’ and ‘non-place’ to the definition of the megachurch (2014). He links a certain type of megachurch both to a foregrounding of customer care (comfort, pleasure, contentment) and to Augé’s (1992) anthropological concept of the non-place: that which lacks distinguishing features or contextual references (Sanders 2014: 71) reflecting the banality of consumer capitalism. An apposite example is Willow Creek Church in Chicago, to which more than 20,000 people flock weekly, founded by ex-pastor Bill Hybels. Hybels has described the church
as being purposely designed to look like the secular buildings that non-religious people frequent: “What we want him [unchurched Harry] to do is just say, ‘I was just at corporate headquarters for IBM in Atlanta on Wednesday, and now I come to church here and it’s basically the same.” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 123)

However, Evangelicalism, despite its best efforts to be seeker friendly, retains a distinctly separate culture that crystallises once the seeker is embedded within the community. The pressure to conform to a culture that has arisen from a complex entanglement between a typically Evangelical interpretation of the Bible and conservative social values (which intensify toward the fundamentalist end of the church spectrum) produced by a colonial Christian Anglo-American identity which appears under siege (Connelly et al 2017), forms the alternate reality of the believer, one intrinsically at odds with pluralistic, liberal and secular ‘outside’ culture. The influence of the white Evangelical vote on American Republicanism (Fitzgerald 2017) and the ongoing ‘culture wars’ (Hunter 1991) is evidence of this split. Chris Hedges condemns Evangelicalism at large for its failure to call out the embroilment between religion and state in his provocatively titled book American Fascists: The Christian Right and The War on America, and for ushering in a ‘selective literalism’ (referring to William Sloane Coffin who coined the phrase) in which the parts of the Bible that conform to their ideology are highlighted and the rest ignored or manipulated (2007: 6): “the Bible has long been used in the wrong hands – such as antebellum slave owners in the American South who quoted from it to defend slavery – not to Christianize the culture, as those wielding it often claim, but to acculturate the Christian faith” (Hedges 2007: 5). Gilling (1992) considers that the line between fundamentalism and conservative Evangelicalism is a fine one.

Whilst many megachurches are monoracial and 90% of American Evangelicals are white (Emerson and Smith 2000), Lakewood is notable for its racial diversity. Non-denominational Evangelical megachurches like Lakewood are more likely to be diverse than mainline congregations, reflecting their urban/exurban locations (Karnes 2007), yet structural racism is yet to be adequately addressed from the pulpit by white church leaders (Robertson 2018) and racism is unwittingly perpetuated by well-meaning white Evangelicals (Emerson and Smith 2000). However, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin on 25th May this year, Joel Osteen broke with his long standing refusal to engage with any issues that might be considered political, and joined Black Lives Matter protests in a march through Houston. Whilst this is a heartening step in the right direction, there remains much work to be done in order to decolonise Evangelical churches at large, and also within Lakewood.

Despite this unexpected display of solidarity, there remains within Lakewood an inner cultural conservativism. As a legacy church handed down through the family from father to son, the male heir is still the head of the church and it is largely men who preach. Heterosexual marriage and the family are promoted as values. Likewise, Lakewood’s
literal interpretation of the Bible can be accessed on Osteen’s ministry website, where he states: “We believe the entire Bible is inspired by God, without error and the authority on which we base our faith, conduct and doctrine.” (“What We Believe” n.d.) Whilst every effort is made to create accessibility and relevance for those in the religious marketplace, at the core of megachurch culture is an anti-progressive intransigence in its adherence to Biblical ‘truth’ as interpreted by the leadership for whom Biblical values are always socially conservative ones. This creates a cultural or paradigmatic totality, subsuming the believer within a way of thinking and being, creating tension with those who aren’t able to fit within heteronormative parameters. Diversity, therefore, is a contemporary sheen on a culture that remains, at its core, conventional in its adherence to an uncritical perpetuation of racial and other norms within the American church.

Lakewood, along with other megachurches, tends to form a culturally homogeneous container. We can think of this closed container as a total paradigm. Sociologist Matthew Wade, in his study of the global Hillsong megachurch brand (there are ten Hillsong churches in North America alone), has designated it an “enchanting total institution” (2015). Wade draws on the seminal work of sociologist Erving Goffman, whose term “total institution” (1962) delineated institutions in which people live in close proximity over long periods and within tight hierarchies in order to work towards a single shared goal. These groups are also separated from wider society with legitimised authorities overseeing all aspects of life, and participants self-regulating their behaviour towards the goal. Wade posits Hillsong as existing within the category of total institution in which self-development, personal discovery and commitment to a wider shared cause are the identifying factors: “the total institution of Hillsong takes form in the gradual melding of the pragmatic and the transcendent.” (2015: 663) He considers that Hillsong, as a voluntary institution, is less authoritarian than the classic Goffmanian total institution, but “is characterized by a persuasively assuaging hold on personal loyalties through the promise of enchantment and reinvention.” (Wade 2015: 664)

Megachurches are frequently typified by an insistence on high levels of participation. New seekers are quickly ensconced within the life of the church. Wade writes that in the example of Hillsong it “aspires to be a ‘full-service’ Church, where, once sufficiently integrated, life within the church can become ‘all-encompassing’ for the individual.” (2015:667) Megachurches provides a structure and order for life, meeting seekers needs for community, work and leisure. Hillsong churches, for example, are described as ‘campuses’: alongside weekly services a range of other functions and ways to participate are offered, including bookshops, cafés, childcare, groups for teens and students and voluntary social outreach work. As with other Evangelical megachurches, faith becomes the lens through which everything is viewed, whether in work, at home, in relationships, at leisure, all aspects of life are considered as being part of and subservient to sustaining and spreading faith, as produced within the church.

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The ‘greedy institution’ (Coser 1974: 3-4) of the megachurch seeks exclusive and undivided loyalty by “tying the organization and all its activities to a higher, collective purpose, namely that of ‘saving’ the ‘unsaved’” (Wade 2015: 669). Congregants are aware of desired behaviours, and accordingly self-regulate. There are no overtly stated rules, but an implicit culture in which to deviate from certain norms risks disapproval and exclusion. Critical thinking or questioning authority is a taboo. At Lakewood the congregation is urged not to spend time with fault finders, to stay unified and celebrate each other. A childlike faith is encouraged. Both within Lakewood and Evangelical culture at large, a circular logic or rationale is embedded, where to question the church is framed as inverting the natural order of God (the church as representative of God) over man. From this rationale follows the idea that the contamination of secular culture is unspiritual worldliness, a form of deviance, unaligned to the revealed truth of the Bible. The leadership’s interpretation of the Bible is the orienting device, the compass around which the culture is organized. This rationale subsumes all questions and resistance. Conceptions of wisdom and foolishness are at odds with secular paradigms. These intangible but effective means create a culture that is more boundaryed than it first appears. This engenders a strong sense of belonging, the feeling of being ‘aliens and strangers’ (Strahn 2015) in a disbelieving world which needs, above all else to receive the truth and be brought home into the church. These forms of totalizing logic operate as a bulwark against doubt and deviation. This creation of symbolic boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ strengthens the sense of an insular totality and of “seeming to be everywhere” (Ritzer 2010: 144). The total institution “does not so much support the self as constitute it.” (Goffman 1962: 168)

The sense of containment within the paradigmatic totality of the megachurch is, paradoxically, intensified by an openness, a visual totality – the embodied experience of being within a spectacular crowd that is repeated across vast screens into a seeming infinity of bodies. This spread of bodies is partially closed within the physical bounds of the megachurch building, but also is radically open when pictured as part of the global Evangelical crowd. For Elias Canetti, the crowd is a wave, the point at which the individual loses their fear of touch, where the “burdens of distance” (1960: 18) collapse. To be touched provokes both physical and emotional responses. It opens up the boundaries between oneself and the other. The individual and crowd both have their own agency, this agency is held in a relational tension: a dynamic responsiveness existing between the individual and the crowd. The crowd is both unified and is also a multiplicity of shifting

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4 With the advent of the global Covid-19 pandemic, Lakewood, unlike some Evangelical churches who defiantly remained open with the claim that God would protect them, was swift in its response, closing the site to visitors in mid-March 2020 and moving to stream all its services online. This has provided a temporary break in the physical experience of the crowd (in person services resumed on 18th October 2020). However, Osteen has emphasised the success that this has brought in relation to spreading the good news message with record numbers globally joining online for services and a record number of homes tuning in to Lakewood television broadcasts nationwide.
and temporary connections. Within the space and atmosphere of the crowd imitative possibilities open (Tarde 1901; Durkheim 1912) creating waves of emotion in the moment, and producing cultural homogeneity over time. The megachurch constitutes a crowd unified by a shared feeling, bearing a relation to protests, festivals and audiences.

Canetti distinguishes between open and closed crowds: the open crowd (a protest, for example) constantly desires growth and dissipates if this does not happen, whilst the closed crowd (an audience) is a more permanent entity with physical boundaries and limited entrances. The closed crowd “creates a space for itself which it will fill. This space can be compared to a vessel in which liquid is being poured and whose capacity is known” (Canetti 1960: 17). Whilst the global growth of Evangelicalism suggests it is an open crowd that spreads across time and space, the megachurch exists as a partially open/partially closed entity with a porous material and cultural boundaries. Lakewood appears open in its contemporary appeal and accessibility, and its status as Evangelical connects it to the global expansion that aims to bring everyone within the bounds of the church, but once inside, the arena like space denotes a closed crowd, and an insular culture creates a sense of inside and out.

Canetti emphasizes the boundless and attractive nature of the crowd: “As soon as it exists at all, it wants to consist of more people: the urge to grow is the first and supreme attribute of the crowd. It wants to seize everyone within reach; anything shaped like a human being can join it.” (1960: 16) For Canetti the crowd has no natural limit. It is unified only in its potential for gravitational expansion. Within the megachurch crowd this is reinforced by the constant growth of congregants and repeated images and suggestions of global growth during services and in church literature and online.

Figure 4. Lakewood Church website: https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/
Bodies may temporarily leave, but within the transforming space of the megachurch worship, the performative speech act of naming oneself a believer reconstructs them as part of the crowd. It is easy to flow into the megachurch, but somewhat harder to leave. Belonging becomes cemented within open/closed, believer/non-believer and holy/unholy dualisms.

3. The World: A Global Climate of Belief

Lastly Lakewood’s globe is representative of the ever expanding spread of Evangelicalism around the world. Historian David Bebbington (1993) proposes four key elements that define Evangelicalism: atonement (salvation through Jesus’s crucifixion); the experience of being born again as a Christian; the authority of the Bible; and conversionism. The emphasis on the telling of the good news story is central to the culture and continued growth of this form of Protestant Christianity.

Osteen and Lakewood are indicative of many seeker type megachurches that offer a gateway into Evangelicalism through a readily available, accessible message that is unchallenging, comforting and memorable. Lakewood’s culture is inflected with its context as both proudly Texan (“Everything is Bigger in Texas!” is a much repeated Texan slogan) and American. The spread of Christianity by early European immigrants to indigenous people and the colonising vision of settlers claiming a stake in a ‘new world’, combines into a specifically American mythology of expansion and domination. Ed Simon describes a “myth-haunted America” in which “the image of America as paradisiacal realm where the individual is granted agency among the sovereignty of a new and constructed people still contains an evocative and enchanted power.” (2018: 13) Texan wealth as a result of oil booms and Houston’s history as a key trading port reinforces belief in success, domination and the pre-eminence of the (religious) market place. Rather than emphasise social justice or structural change, Osteen focusses almost entirely on a message of individualistic self-help, chiming with conservative rhetoric of individual rights and responsibilities, or ‘pulling yourself up by your bootstraps’. Likewise, Osteen’s global impact is largely through the propagation of his message, rather than meeting more basic material needs. Lakewood participates in some social welfare outreach at a local level in Houston: medical and homeless outreach, a food bank and ‘Servolution’ – an organization that seeks to Evangelise through helping the needy. The church is also partnered with some international mission that includes medical aid, but its scope is rather limited when taking into account Lakewood’s financial wealth, manpower and the Osteen’s hugely influential platform. Spreading the Osteen message is considered paramount. For the Evangelical this message has material impact through the blessings believers might begin to reap once they turn to God. Osteen’s message is channelled through a variety of modes of communication. Over the past eight years, Joel and his wife Victoria Osteen have taken the message to sold out venues in their “Night of Hope”
stadium tours, reaching more than two million people across the U.S. and around the world. The message is also transmitted globally via broadcast and the internet.

Lakewood’s media broadcast has expanded into every U.S. television market: this reaches over 200 million households in the United States and to an international audience of tens of millions more across more than 100 nations and 6 continents. Currently, the plan is to extend into time slots directly after local news across North America via ‘Hope TV’. In addition, Joel’s weekly sermons are streamed live over the internet to reach into virtually every nation. Through podcasts (48 million downloaded to date), Sirius XM radio (in

Figure 5. Lakewood Sunday morning service. Worship in progress.
28th July 2019 (Image credit: Kate Pickering)
2014, the station launched Joel Osteen Radio), and social media platforms the message is more accessible than ever before. Osteen’s ministry website quotes Osteen as saying that:

“Half the people who watch us don’t go to church,” he says. “And so that was our goal: How do we get outside of the church? I want to talk to the people who think, I’m not a religious person. When Jesus was here, you know he didn’t stay in the synagogue. He went out in the marketplace, and so that’s what we try to do.”

The sense of megachurch culture as a totalizing containment, at odds with a disbelieving world, combines with a visual immersion within a global crowd of belief which appears frameless. Images of the Sanctuary filled with bodies, perceived both live and on screen, are visually suggestive of global domination. This has a cognitive and embodied impact on the individual in the crowd. The individual’s bodily positioning within the mega produces a feeling of being small-scale, encountering one’s body in relation to vastness, seen in an infinite mise en abyme of bodies, repeated over multiple screens. This visual immersion has the potential to produce an experience of the sublime as something both compelling and threatening. Jacques Derrida describes the sublime as an infinity, as without limit, without frame: “The colossal excludes the parergon [the ‘outside-the-work’] [...] because the infinite is presented in it and the infinite cannot be bordered.” (1978: 41) The colossal, the excessive has no outside. The image of countless bodies, eyes closed, tears rolling, arms held aloft, fills the visual field of those in the crowd. This visual saturation, in concert with the constant repetition of a grounding narrative, overwhelms and enchants the congregant, creating a sense of dis/orientation. The narrative fixes, the spectacle disorients. In worship, the sensations of being embodied but open to a limitlessness, a “superabundance” (Derrida 1978: 43) provokes an overwhelming feeling of being flooded. This saturating affect, intensified by the charged atmosphere and loud, lyrically emotive music played by multiple musicians, is relayed across body, crowd, stage and screen. This imagery repeatedly produces the “performance of pleasure” (Wade 2015: 671): the image of the divinely touched human-global body.

The encounter with limitlessness is where language and reason are subsumed by embodied response, a response which is one of a deep movement, a shift within the subject. In this state, cognition combines with embodied affect: the subject is moved and belief intensified. In the sublime encounter with the mega, the subject experiences spatial and temporal distortion: a loss of their sense of containment. As the believer has a spiritual experience, according to neurotheology, activity in the left and right parietal lobes reduces. The parietal lobes are the area of the brain involved with orientation, enabling us to perceive three dimensional objects in space (Newberg and Waldman, 2006). Decreased activity in the superior parietal or prefrontal cortexes, affecting the processing of temporal and spatial orientation, lessens the sense of existing in a boundaried body.
An openness to the other and to other objects increases. The ‘I’ opens to the ‘you’. New subjectivities emerge. The perception of time and space distorts, increases in serotonin and endorphins create similar feelings to other pleasure giving activities. Within this space of limitlessness, boundary distinctions fail, entailing a one-ness with other subjects and objects, the subject is transformed by a fearful but compelling subsumption of identity into the expansive Evangelical narrative. Identity is lost and remade, for the believer life is now immersed in Evangelicalism, narrativised as an overwhelmingly positive step into a new life of blessing and abundance. Cognitively and rationally the believer is framed, but visually, via a repetition on screen the subject sees themselves as part of a frameless infinity. The megachurch produces an excess, an atmospheric flood of emotion which destabilizes, creating a paradox of boundary/less-ness, a tension between fixity of belief and the dynamic e/motion, along with the thrill of fear as the self is dissolved into a new identity as Evangelical. This atmosphere is a spread of belief that extends beyond the bounds of the megachurch and envelops the globe.

This emphasis on the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth is intensified within Dominion Theology, a particularly influential movement in the United States where a form of Christian nationalism - the belief that America is and should be an entirely Christian nation - has become entrenched. Whilst the complex entanglement between Republicanism and conservative Evangelicalism has been covered numerously (see Fitzgerald 2017, Heinmann 1998, Hunter 1991 et al.), Dominionists are Evangelicals who actively seek to dissolve the separation between church and state, with the ultimate aim...
of establishing a Christian theocracy (Hedges 2007). These beliefs might appear extreme, yet almost one in five Americans hold beliefs which are consistent with Dominionist ideology. Whitehead and Perry (2020) quantify American attitudes towards Christian nationalism into four categories – Rejecters, Resistors, Accommodators and Ambassadors, with Ambassadors making up 19.8% of the population. These beliefs are entangled with the idea that Christians should urgently act to hasten the ‘glory’ of the new heaven and earth, the predestined end times described in Revelations. Whilst not all Evangelicals are Dominionists and the obsession with end times varies greatly across American Evangelicalism, Dominionism appears to be a culmination or logical next step of conservative Evangelicalism. Even if not involved in Dominionist efforts, Hedges (2007) argues that conservative Evangelical churches such as Lakewood enable its growing influence in North American politics, by failing to call it out and therefore accommodating American Christian fascism, allowing it to thrive and present an ever growing threat to democracy, freedom and tolerance. The Evangelicalism of the American megachurch might appear benevolent but it houses within it a religious spectrum that includes a fomenting proto-fascism.

Lakewood megachurch is an entity that has become vast in its scales of belonging: individual conviction, connect groups, worship services, conferences, Nights of Hope and international networks. The Evangelical megachurch is more than the sum of its congregants, its conditions propagate infinities, it aims for a total and global reach. At the heart of it is both an embodied orientation, a turning away from the disorientations and contingencies of contemporary life to face a foundational truth is deeply comforting, and a disorienting encounter with the limitless of the global crowd, produced by immersion in the seemingly infinite body of the church destined to spread amongst all of humanity.

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