

Lakewood Megachurch:
Bodily Dis/Orientations in a Climate of Belief

Kate Pickering
PhD
Goldsmiths College, University of London

August MMXXII

Supervisors:
Professor Michael Newman and Dr Bridget Crone

Declaration: I, Kate Pickering, declare the work presented herein to be my own, and is the thesis upon which I, the candidate, intend to be examined upon.

Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of friend and supervisor Dr Bridget Crone.

I count myself incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to be supervised by Professor Kristen Kreider for the first four years of my PhD, Dr Bridget Crone throughout, and Professor Michael Newman for the final two years. Kristen was the determining factor in deciding to study at Goldsmiths, and I'm so glad I took that path. Thank you Kristen for your wonderful generosity, enthusiasm, wit and kindness. Dr Bridget Crone has been incredibly supportive and perceptive, offering deep engagement with my work, and a number of opportunities to develop as an academic. Also, a huge thank you to Professor Michael Newman for your belief in my project right from the start, and also kindly taking over after Kristen's departure. I have really appreciated the wealth of ideas you've suggested to me in supervisions. You have all gifted me with not only your expertise, but given me courage.

Thank you also to the CHASE team for providing me with a full scholarship. This changed the course of my experience of the PhD. Not only did this relieve the financial burden of studying and increased my confidence as a researcher, but additionally provided an impressive range of support, including funding research trips to Houston and Norwich, and covering the costs for the Writing for Practice Forum I set up with fellow researcher Rowena Harris.

Many thanks also to Dr Edwin Coomasaru who invited me to contribute a book chapter for Courtauld Books Online, and Theresa Diechert who provided brilliant and incisive editorial feedback which enabled me to shape my third chapter of the thesis. Likewise, I am very grateful to Sam Nightingale, Bridget Crone and Polly Stanton for including me in an edited book on artistic research methodologies. Their feedback also contributed to my introduction and framing of my project. Thanks also to Bridget for the opportunity of involvement in the Liquidity Cohort, a fantastic group of cross disciplinary researchers, and to Lucy A. Sames for introducing me to floating through her inspired Wet Rest reading/ research group.

Thanks to Father Luke Penkett of the Julian Reading Centre, for taking time to direct me (as a total Julian novice) to a number of relevant books in the library there and allowing me to work in the Centre over several days. Likewise, Father Adrian Ling was kind enough to meet me on a chilly day in Kings Lynn to show me around the ancient All Saints Church including the anchorhold, and talk to me about the anchoresses that lived there. Dr Stephanie Thomas of Public Citizen who kindly gave her time to meet and fill me in on air pollution and climate issues in Houston. Thanks lastly to the Houston Metropolitan Research Centre for assistance in locating books and photographs.

I also count myself lucky to have studied alongside so many truly brilliant artists, writers and co-conspirators on the art research programme at Goldsmiths, I hope we can continue to collaborate. Thanks also to the generosity of those who helped me start out on the path to applying for a PhD: Dr Emily Rosamond (and for your continued friendship and support), Dr Nina Trivedi and Dr Becky Shaw.

Finally, thank you to all the exvangelicals on Facebook and elsewhere, I'm always glad to know I'm not alone. To artist, shaman and spiritual adventurer Ric Stott, for occasionally travelling with me on the journey out of a former faith and into something altogether different. To Charlotte Warne Thomas who has taught me so much over the course of running Peer Sessions (thirteen years!) together. To my families, both Battes and Pickering, especially my Mum for the endless love, support and always taking an interest, and my sister Louise for being a constant source of empathy and laughter. To Jess Richardson, Matt Richardson, Hugh Stickland, Jo Bartlett, Rowena Harris, Val Austen and especially Jenny Stickland, you're all wonderful, thanks for keeping me sane. To Andrew, my rock. To Eva and Lila, for providing much joy and distraction, you make everything worthwhile.

Lakewood Megachurch: Bodily Dis/Orientations in a Climate of Belief

Contents

Abstract

Dissertation Image List

Introduction to Dissertation and ‘There is a Miracle in Your Mouth’

Dissertation:

Chapter 1: **Lakewood’s Orienting Story-World**

Chapter 2: **Lakewood as a Porous Container**

Chapter 3: **Affective Atmospheres in a Climate of Belief**

Conclusion

Bibliography

Practice submission (separate document): **There is a Miracle in Your Mouth**

Appendix 1: **Documentation of Performative Readings and Texts**

Abstract

This interdisciplinary project examines the entanglements of body, belief and site through an examination of evangelical megachurch imaginaries within destabilised ecological contexts. The megachurch is defined as a church with more than 2,000 in weekly attendance, although globally, a significant proportion reach the tens and hundreds of thousands. I focus on North America's largest megachurch, Lakewood, based in Texas, which deploys scale, spectacle and performance to immerse believers in its story-world. Through theoretical and experimental writing I explore how the individual and collective body is oriented within the site. The believer's gaze is directed heavenward toward victory and success, away from complex realities.

Setting out from new materialist understandings of the body as entangled in a web of relations and combining philosophy, visual and literary theories, I draw on my position as exevangelical and my own experiences of megachurch evangelicalism to analyse the story-world of Lakewood. Using Mieke Bal's schema of 'narrative,' 'story,' and 'fabula,' I examine how Lakewood's immersive multi-sensory texts form a 'total work of art,' conveying ideological imaginaries of belonging, order, progress and comfort. I consider how embodied response produces affective atmospheres, a 'climate of belief' in which bodies weather unequally. The racially diverse congregation are caught between a sky-bound gaze and earth-bound realities of a locale threatened by hurricane, flooding, subsidence and pollution.

Alongside the dissertation, my experimental text *There is a Miracle in Your Mouth* is formed of memoir, research and speculative fiction. Informed by a practice of floating and new materialist thought, it reorients the megachurch. Through writing the religious building-body as a fluid, porous and emergent phenomenon, a body/site that is always enmeshed in ecological connections, I highlight the certainties of belief and the disorientation of disbelief as a bodily and materially produced phenomenon, disrupting the solidity, simplicity and sky-bound orientation of the evangelical narrative.

Dissertation Image List

Fig. 1. Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2013. (Image credit: ToBeDaniel) Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38716905>).

Fig. 2. Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 3. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood worship during 'Seeing Beyond the Logical,' Lakewood Church Service, Sunday 3rd April 2022, available at 15.03 mins – 19.25 mins: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>).

Fig. 4. Depiction of a bishop blessing an anchoress found in the manuscript, MS 079: Pontifical, held at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and dated c. 1400 and c. 1410, unknown artist. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons (available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CCCC_MS_79_fol72r_300px.jpg).

Fig. 5. Pastors John and Dodie Osteen, Lakewood Church, by Edd Hayes. (2009, bronze, 10 x 5 ft.) (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 6. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood's golden globe, available at: <https://rbdg.com/project/lakewood-church/>).

Fig. 7. Joel Osteen preaching at Lakewood Church on July 17, 2016. Robert M. Worsham, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>).

Fig. 8. Lakewood Church Bookstore, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

Fig. 9. Material removed due to copyright. (You Can Live Your Best Live [Life] Now, Joel Osteen Blog, 2017, available at: <https://www.joelosteen.com/inspiration/blogs>).

Fig. 10. Material removed due to copyright. (Are You Receiving When You're Believing? Joel Osteen Blog, 2022, available at: <https://www.joelosteen.com/inspiration/blogs>).

Fig. 11. Lakewood Church Drive, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 12. Lakewood Church exterior, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 13. The crowd repeated on screen at Lakewood Church interior, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 14. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 15. Joel Osteen on the main screen, Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 16. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 17. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 18. Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. (1647–1652, marble.) (Image credit: Livioandronico2013, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons. Available at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Ecstasy_of_St._Teresa_HDR.jpg).

Fig. 19. Material removed due to copyright. (Make Freedom Yours, Joel Osteen Blog, 2022, available at: <https://www.joelosteen.com/inspiration/blogs>).

Fig. 20. Lakewood's carpet on the mezzanine floor, July 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 21. Projection on Mezzanine Floor, Lakewood Church, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 22. The Buffalo Bayou, July 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 23. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood worship during 'Seeing Beyond the Logical,' Lakewood Church Service, Sunday 3rd April 2022, available at 15.03 mins – 19.25 mins: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>).

Fig. 24. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood worship during 'Seeing Beyond the Logical,' Lakewood Church Service, Sunday 3rd April 2022, available at 15.03 mins – 19.25 mins: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>).

Fig. 25. Houston skyline from the freeway, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 26. Material removed due to copyright. (Joel Osteen Instagram stories: 'When you speak victory,' 2nd April 2022; 'You don't have to chase the blessings,' 28th May 2022; 'Rise up and go after your dreams,' 13th May 2022; 'There is promotion in every problem,' 29th January 2022, available at: <https://www.instagram.com/joelosteen/?hl=en>).

Fig. 27. Joel Osteen preaching, Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 28. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood Church website, 2020, available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/>).

Fig. 29. Phil Munsey, 'Practice Makes Imperfect', Lakewood Church, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 30. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 31. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 32. Flood levels at the Buffalo Bayou, July 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 33. US flag at the back of the Sanctuary, Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 34. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 35. Houston skyline from the freeway, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Fig. 36. Material removed due to copyright. (Ramona Lewis-Freeman, 'People of God, are y'all speaking to Laura or what?!,' Facebook, 26th August 2020, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3464309083592497&set=a.239139896109448>).

Fig. 37. Meeting Joel Osteen, 3rd August 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

Lakewood Megachurch: Bodily Dis/Orientations in a Climate of Belief

Introduction to Dissertation and ‘There is a Miracle in Your Mouth’

As an artist and writer, I work from the dis/identity of being an Exvangelical (an ex-evangelical).¹ I became a born again Christian as a child in a secular family through reading an evangelical tract with the title ‘Bridge to Life.’ Filled with the Holy Spirit, I saw an image, as though I were lucid dreaming, of straight path laid out before me toward God and toward a light filled future. Already internalising the linear, sky-bound teleology of evangelicalism, it was clear that this was a path from which I mustn’t stray.² After questioning my nascent, solitary faith during my early teens, I recommitted through joining a church youth group. God, and the evangelical movement in which I found Him, then became an all-consuming passion for me throughout my late teens and twenties until I began to slowly retreat from its immersive culture two decades later. My research is therefore motivated by a desire to understand how belief comes to matter, how belief materialises. I am less interested in whether belief is based on something demonstrably true, instead in how belief materialises in and through our embodied reality, how a believing body is shaped by the material world and materially shapes the world in a dynamic and inseparable enmeshment.

It is difficult to convey the profoundly transformative experience of involvement in the evangelical movement, and even though I no longer identify as evangelical it has irrevocably altered my sense of self. For Jose Esteban Muñoz, ‘disidentification’ is a strategy enacted by those who work against/ with being othered by dominant systems of belonging. Muñoz argues that heteronormativity, White supremacy and misogyny are cultural logics that undergird state power. Disidentifying is a survival strategy for oppressed subjects. The subject re-performs the normative identity as their own, revealing the power dynamics at play.³ ‘Dis’ is a negative prefix meaning not or none, but in the research I do not negate my relationship with the culture that once held sway over me. For this reason I insert a slash to reconfigure the term as ‘dis/identification,’ I both identify and disidentify, I both believe and disbelieve.

¹ This term was coined by Blake Chastain in 2016 and is the title of a series of podcasts by him on the experience of leaving Evangelicalism. See Bradley Onishi, “The Rise of #Exvangelical” Religion and Politics, accessed: 2nd March 2021, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/> and Blake Chastain, “Exvangelical” podcast, accessed 10th June 2022, <https://www.exvangelicalpodcast.com/>.

² Sky-bound in relation to Haraway’s reference to the ‘sky god of the Anthropocene’ in Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016), 39. Haraway’s term responded to Latour’s reference to ‘Earthbound of the Anthropocene’ in Bruno Latour and Catherine Porter, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity, 2017), 248. The earthbound, for Latour, are those who face the earth, telling earthly (and also earthy) stories for its survival. Instead of the earthbound orientation required for engaging with the environmental catastrophe, I propose that Lakewood church, in its’ emphasis on the teleological endpoint of Christ’s return from the sky at the apocalypse and an upward sweep of victory and success for believers toward this endpoint, produces a sky-bound orientation.

³ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), introduction. Disidentification is a strategy that contests hegemonic identities: ‘whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label.’ (Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 185). For Muñoz, ‘Chusma’ (over the top, stereotypical Latina identity) for example, is linked to stigmatised class identity. The toxic identity of the Chusma is remade as powerful through owning the identity by subjects hailed as Chusma – managing an identity that has been ‘spoiled’ in the majoritarian public sphere. It turns the injurious speech/ name/ identity to new use – countering the offensive call. Whilst recognising my White and heteronormative privilege in relation to Muñoz’s minoritarian position, and also the fact that evangelicalism in the UK has a markedly different claim on wider structures of power than it does in the US, my position reflects Muñoz in that it is a fundamentally equivocal, undecidable one.

My dis/identificatory position might be linked to the movement of oscillation, a disorienting movement around a central point, a key image for my thinking and writing in both aspects of my project. My movement out of evangelicalism has not formed a straight path but an oscillatory, back and forth shift between positions, sometimes seeing outside in and at others inside out. The non-fixity of oscillation can be disorienting and discomfiting, but in its fluidity it is also one of potential and multiplicity, of being able, in its circling motion, to be able to see from multiple perspectives. It also reflects my continued sense of loyalty, of not being able to disengage completely. For Muñoz, disidentification remakes the identificatory position and therefore claims power over its minoritizing effects, it presents the possibility of survival and protection in the face of violence. For me it has been a way to continue to sit in the porous boundary between inside and out during the course of my research. From my position as an artist in the markedly different cultural context of contemporary art, I dissolve the static, monolithic nature of evangelical authority. However, as a former evangelical I also recognise what it can offer: community, belonging, purpose, identity, pleasure and meaning. I flip back into and out of evangelicalism in my field visits and dissertation and experimental writing. I perform and then re-perform it otherwise, rejecting transcendence and redemption even as I position myself on the inside. Echoing Muñoz, it is a equivocal, undecidable position. Against the imaginary of salvation as eternal, I prevaricate, a heretical move within the fixity of evangelicalism.

My experience of belief upon absorbing the compelling narratives of evangelicalism initially materialized within me as a kind of orientation. Through accepting the seemingly authoritative, male-dominated teaching of the evangelical worldview, I experienced faith as a coherent navigational system, a bodily and cognitive orientation with which to negotiate the contingencies of life.⁴ As Sara Ahmed has highlighted, to be oriented is to: ‘turn toward certain objects, those that help us find our way.’⁵ Within evangelicalism, this forms a turning toward the orienting texts of the church. Inside this story-world, bodies experience a set of imaginaries that produce and sustain belief.

For Ahmed, repetitive actions and alignments produce orientations. These orientations enable us to feel at home.⁶ In my daily church and faith-based activities, belief became a repetitive, reinforcing habit and an orienting habituation within a ‘religious habitus.’⁷ It provoked bodily sensations of being grounded and stabilized by a powerful narrative through immersion in a ‘total’ institution.⁸ More rarely it provoked fluid experiences of wonder and euphoria. Within the atmospheric enclosure of spectacular worship celebrations, moments of openness to a seemingly divine presence created a dizzying elation. As my faith disintegrated, I experienced a

⁴ See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967; 1990), 5-20 on religion as a way to create a collective sense of stability, a structure which enables us to be co-ordinated in relation to the world, and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press (Theory and history of literature, v. 76), 1991), 49 on myth as a way to bind the world into a structure upon which we can stand.

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2-3, 9.

⁷ The habitus brings together both body and social structure in a dynamic interaction in order to adequately theorise religious belief in contemporary society. Phillip A. Mellor, P. & Chris Shilling in ‘The Religious Habitus: Embodiment, Religion and Sociological Theory’ in Brian Turner (ed.) *New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016) propose the sociological concept of ‘body pedagogics’: ‘how, and to what degree, the orientations, dispositions, values, and techniques validated by cultural forms, including those of religion, are actually embodied in individuals.’ 2016, 215.

⁸ Matthew Wade, ‘Seeker-Friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution’, *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4 (December 2016): 661–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783315575171>.

deep grief in the loss of both a community and a comforting story-world in which everything and everyone is accounted for, a feeling of existential disorientation, as though the rug had been pulled from under my feet.⁹ These bodily dis/orientations inform both this dissertation and an experimental text, titled ‘There is a Miracle in Your Mouth.’

If orientation is the sensation of location in relation to certain objects, dis/identification might be thought of as a dis-alignment, a dislocation from the normative anchor points of identity. The etymology of convert is to turn about or around; to not have faith within the evangelical lexicon is to be ‘lost,’ to have it and then lose it is to become a ‘backslider’ or to be ‘fallen.’ The language foregrounds the embodied and spatial experience of faith as an practice and identity. My sense of loss and disorientation has lessened over time, but these bodily responses drive my research and practice, creating a desire to understand how this story-world, a fabulation that runs counter to the evidence of the nothing more (or less) than matter inveigled my thinking and being.

This project exists at the intersection of a number of fields, my position on the inside/ outside of evangelicalism is reflected in a disciplinary liminality. Whilst the dissertation draws on philosophy, visual and literary theories in addition to sociological, anthropological and historical research, the project is also artistic and autoethnographic. Principally, through both dissertation and experimental writing, I apply feminist new materialism to the embodied experience of religious visual and material culture. Setting out from the idea that the body is always in an interconnected field of relations, including (but not limited to) the social, political, religious and ecological, I explore my proposition that evangelical belief arises from bodily dis/orientation within the overarching story-world of the megachurch. In the dissertation this proposition is examined through an analysis of the visual, material and spatial forms that communicate a narrative, leading to a set of imaginaries. I examine what the imaginaries of the evangelical story-world are, how these imaginaries materialise and why this matters. These imaginaries also form the structure of my experimental writing.

The theoretical part of this project critically examines the imaginaries within the visual and material culture of Lakewood, a Charismatic non-denominational evangelical church,¹⁰ based in Houston, Texas. The megachurch (defined as a church with 2,000 or more congregants in weekly attendance) materialises and visualises evangelicalism’s drive toward a global body of belief.¹¹ Lakewood is North America’s largest megachurch. I argue that this site materializes and images American evangelicalism in its most expansive and accessible form. Up to 52,000 people attend Lakewood on a weekly basis and millions more access the services via TV broadcast, online

⁹ See Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 21-22 for his discussion of the disorientation of the world-building nomos collapsing, and also Ruth Perrin on the sense of disorientation provoked by loss of the Christian faith in ‘Losing My Religion: Millennials and Faith Loss’ Discipleship Research, accessed 6th June 2022, <http://discipleshipresearch.com/2018/02/losing-my-religion-millennials-and-faith-loss/>.

¹⁰ The Charismatic movement is typified by a belief in the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit or God’s power to perform miracles in the here and now. It is sometimes called Neo-Pentecostalism. It arose from the overflow of Pentecostal beliefs and practices into mainstream/ mainline churches. Pentecostalism, a movement arising at the turn of the Twentieth Century, specifically believes that baptism of the Holy Spirit, the direct intervention of God through miracles, healing and speaking in tongues (glossolalia) are signs of an authentic conversion. See: ‘Charismatic Christians’ *Christianity*, accessed 11th November 2021, <https://christianity.org.uk/article/charismatic-christians> and J. Gordon Melton, ‘Pentecostalism’ *Britannica*, accessed 11th November 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pentecostalism>.

¹¹ See Scott Thumma, *The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory: Megachurch in Modern American Society* (Doctoral Dissertation, Emory University, 1996).

and through podcasts from around the world.¹² Lakewood imaginaries of comfort, progress, belonging and order are communicated via a range of multi-sensory visual and material forms - I refer to them as texts - that combine into an immersive 'total work of art.'¹³ The embodied perception of these communicative texts embeds the imaginaries within the congregation. They subtly convey the ideas and beliefs perpetuated by the leadership of the church (the Osteen family) within the wider context of North American evangelical norms. These imaginaries produce affective atmospheres, a climate of belief in which weathering bodies are caught between a sky-bound gaze and earth-bound realities of a locale threatened by extreme weather events. Lakewood's believers may experience a rupture in their story-world as the site is liable to be breached by climate catastrophes of various kinds if those governments in thrall to neoliberalism continue to delay their response to climate crisis. This rupture of the real into the space of the imagined presents a future loss of their own stable ground, both literal and imagined, a giving way beneath their feet. My interest in American megachurch evangelicalism rather than evangelicalism in other nations is due to the particular confluence of White American religious and national identity and political beliefs, particularly in its' adherence to an eschatological (end of the world) narrative and its' response to climate crisis.



Fig. 1. Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2013. (Image credit: ToBeDaniel) Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38716905>

¹² Stoyan Zaimov, 'Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church Ranked America's Largest Megachurch With 52,000 Weekly Attendance' The Christian Post, accessed: 25 September 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/joel-osteens-lakewood-church-ranked-americas-largest-megachurch-with-52k-in-attendance.html>.

¹³ The total artwork is covered in Chapter Two and refers to a synthesis of different art and technological forms to immerse the believer in an environment that conveys a story and embeds a set of ideas or beliefs.

Mediated forms of church participation are key to the global success of Lakewood, through social media, televisual broadcast, radio, podcast and other published works. Whilst these forms of media are key to the spread and dissemination of Lakewood's message, this project is concerned with embodied 'in real life' engagement on-site rather than digital participation. The body as an experiencing phenomenon within a powerful set of relations - the 'total work of art' constituted by the scalar, visual, material and performative conditions that form affective atmospheres, particularly inside the Sanctuary - are central to the project. Whilst mediated forms serve to maintain and deepen faith, the experience of participating in a worship service embeds and entrains belief in a uniquely embodied way. Therefore, I choose to focus on bodily immersion in relation to non-digital time and space, based both on my own experience of evangelicalism and in research insights generated through my site-based performative readings, rather than exploring the qualitatively different time and space of virtual and digital realities.

For the practice component of this project, I utilise a method of experimental writing that foregrounds the dis/believing body as enmeshed in a web of relations. I attempt to liquefy the seemingly solid bedrock foundations of evangelicalism through a multiply threaded text. Different voices, sites and temporalities are summoned to undo the repetitions of the authorising voice of the typically male leadership and binary simplifications of evangelicalism. Imaged as a building-body, an immersive flood re-imagines the megachurch. Instead of the evangelical trope of a forward, linear movement toward a victorious transcendence, this work has been a downward, backward and inward movement: an excavation, a burrowing into the matter of my body within a bigger body of belief. This burrowing is earth-bound, a rejection of the sky-bound certainties of evangelicalism. Through this I have become a 'prodigal daughter,' a heretical wayfarer.¹⁴ I reorient, through my writing, towards a story-world in which metaphors of orientation and disorientation, enclosure and openness, liquidity and fixity shape form and content. As an Exvangelical who will always be complicit with/ in the movement, I dis/identify with the site of the church. In the text, I write my body both into and out of the evangelical church.

My audience, ultimately, is not an evangelical one. Whilst the research is available to anyone with an interest in the subject matter, I am aware that evangelicalism does not tolerate or permit any challenges, even respectful ones, to its story-world lightly. Evangelicalism largely rejects backsliding former believers, or those who think too much or too critically, who are (sometimes literally) shouted down, being perceived as a threat. The maintenance of the story-world, for evangelicals, protects against the perceived terror of anomy, of meaningless, against the threat of being outside of God's grace. There is little hope of megachurch celebrities engaging with my attempt to hold them to account for the complex contradictions in their story-world. However, situating the research in the secular-seeming worlds of art and academia, it sheds light on the appeal of religious communities and practices and megachurch culture specifically for those who may never have experienced or understood it, hopefully preventing some of the quick reactions and assumptions that are frequently made from the outside.

¹⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 178.

Both forms of writing may deepen understandings of how belief, body and world enmesh in contemporary Christianity.

The Dis/Orientations of Lakewood's Story-world

A recent body of scholarship on the phenomenon of the megachurch has been emerging over the last fifteen years, largely contained within the fields of the sociology, anthropology, ethnography and social and political history of religion. The appearance of the megachurch represents a recent but dramatic shift with Protestantism. Key megachurch scholar Stephen Ellingson describes it as: 'one of the most significant changes to Christianity in the past twenty to thirty years.'¹⁵ However, Ellingson considers that despite the rapid growth of the megachurch, research on this phenomenon is still nascent.¹⁶ He considers that megachurches will continue to be a key influence within Christianity, particularly in the US, in decades to come.¹⁷ He states that: 'there is no shortage of work to be done'¹⁸ for scholarly research on the importance of the megachurch, and points out that much of the data informing the research comes from pastors and church leaders rather than congregants: 'we have very limited demand-side or audience data... we do not fully understand why people attend; why they join, stay or leave; how they experience the worship, fellowship, or theology of megachurches.'¹⁹

Additionally, the material culture surrounding religious belief lacks 'serious empirical, let alone theoretical interest.'²⁰ Religious culture and belief remains underrepresented within the fields of visual cultures and contemporary art. The 'total institution'²¹ of the megachurch appears at odds with art world pluralism and secularism in a context of increasing polarisation of belief. Whilst scholars have begun to interrogate the visual and material cultures of both global and North American megachurches at large,²² and also specifically Lakewood²³ within the emerging field of scholarship, there has yet to be a consideration of how narrative texts convey a set of imaginaries within sites like Lakewood. I highlight how these imaginaries occlude the social, political and particularly ecological interconnectedness of the embodied believer in the site. These imaginaries create a 'climate of belief' in a time of ecological crisis.

¹⁵ Stephen Ellingson, 'New Research on Megachurches: Non-denominationalism and Sectarianism,' in Bryan Turner (ed.) *New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2010), 247.

¹⁶ Ellingson, 'New Research on Megachurches,' 248.

¹⁷ Ellingson, 'New Research on Megachurches,' 263.

¹⁸ Ellingson, 'New Research on Megachurches,' 265.

¹⁹ Ellingson, 'New Research on Megachurches,' 263.

²⁰ Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, eds., *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, 1st ed, *The Future of the Religious Past* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1.

²¹ Wade, 'Seeker-friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution,' 663.

²² See Bratton, *ChurchScape*; Loveland, and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*; Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Oxford; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005); Robbie B. H. Goh, 'Hillsong and "Megachurch" Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism', *Material Religion* 4, no. 3 (November 2008): 284–304, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183408X376665>; Erica Robles-Anderson, 'The Crystal Cathedral: Architecture for Mediated Congregation', *Public Culture* 24, no. 3 68 (1 October 2012): 577–99, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-1630672> et al.

²³ Katja Rakow, 'The Light of the World: Mediating Divine Presence through Light and Sound in a Contemporary Megachurch', *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 84–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696561>; Luke A. Winslow, 'The Imaged Other: Style and Substance in the Rhetoric of Joel Osteen', *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 3 (July 2014): 250–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2013.872173>; Robbie B. H. Goh, 'The Experience Megachurch: Lakewood, Hillsong, and The Pragmatics and Semiotics of "Inspiration"', *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 9, no. 1 (1 May 2020): 33–58, <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-bja10009>; et al.

Into the context of existing research I contribute, through both dissertation and practice, how a body inhabits and experiences the ‘sacred’ space of Lakewood. I map out the imaginaries that are produced and experienced as embodied dis/orientation within Lakewood’s story-world. I contend that belief arises from a sensory reciprocity with the constructed, political, cultural and ecological environments surrounding the believing body. Bodies are not discrete and bounded entities, hermetically sealed off from the world, but are always enmeshed in and constituted by more-than-human and material-spatial-visual conditions.

The authorised narrative of the good news story has the potential to create a perception of being grounded or stabilised. Ahmed speaks of a sense of orientation arising when we have our bearings, when we know where we are. Familiar objects form our anchor points.²⁴ For Ahmed: ‘Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as “who” or “what” we direct our energy and attention toward.’ To be oriented toward something means to turn toward it, but it also entails a turn away from something else. This produces a favourable asymmetry toward the orienting object. At Lakewood, the energy and attention of the crowd, the social body, is directed toward narrative texts that communicate a story, producing collective imaginaries, and a turning away from their binary opposites. Within the story-world of my experimental writing, these imaginaries are complicated with their opposites and exclusions, producing a remapping, a reorientation. Through dis/identifying, I destabilise the orientations of the evangelical story-world.

These orientations are communicated in a number of ways. On conversion, believers’ own life stories become held within the larger structure of the Biblical redemption story. The frequent use of spatial terminology within church culture – grounded by God, God as a rock, Christ the cornerstone or solid foundation, ‘compass’ and ‘navigator’ groups, alongside ‘orientation’ meetings – underlines this stabilising effect. Within worship services held inside the cavernous Sanctuary space, a range of multi-sensory media communicates orientation. Narrative texts of design, lighting, screen based imagery, evocative lyrics, capacious sound and charismatic preaching convey a hyperreal mimicry of elemental forms to suggest a world-founding truth. However, at particular moments during the service, these spectacular, immersive texts, combined with the visual spectacle of crowd, can also produce a sense of pleasurable overwhelm or disorientation. Within this charged atmosphere, a dynamic interplay between orientation and disorientation creates the spiritual experience, entrenching belief within the believing body. This intense embodied feeling creates an imaginary of divine encounter, an ‘affective piety.’²⁵

I posit that Lakewood’s story-world is formed from a set of binary imaginaries which embed belief in comfort, progress, belonging and order. Collective imaginaries refer to the way communities understand themselves and the world around them. For Charles Taylor they are produced by images, myths, stories, and symbols. They enable how: ‘people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others...the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.’²⁶ Imaginaries form

²⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.

²⁵ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 15-20. Affective piety denotes strong religious emotion and devotion. Building on the writing of Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Francis of Assisi, it was particularly practiced during the High Middle Ages and late Medieval Europe.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

a more lasting cultural phenomenon in contrast to the limited duration of the collective atmosphere which arises within the worship service (or other church gatherings). Lakewood's imaginaries arise from believers' multi-sensory engagement with its' communicative actors and texts. Inside the vast, bowl-like stadium filled with thousands of believers, powerful, heartfelt messages are spectacularly performed by preachers and professional musicians, conveying a contemporary American form of redemption. Immersive lighting displays, booming music, dazzling screen based imagery and elemental symbols all contribute to the total work of art, and to the feeling of being held within an intensified and idealised world. The imaginaries have an ideological aspect to them, implicitly conveying socially and politically conservative norms, and are produced within an unequal power dynamic where the huge influence, power and platform of the leadership directs the story-world of the church. Collective expressions of belief through singing, rhythmic movement and vocalisation combine to transmit affect, repetitively embedding the imaginaries into the bodies of believers, entraining them into Lakewood's story-world. The story-world is experienced as authoritative and authentic through bodily sensation and cognition working together.²⁷

An imaginary of comfort arises from the therapeutic narrative of God ordained health and wealth for the believer. The belief in progress manifests into a linear, upward trajectory (the teleological or sky-bound narrative) toward a celestial God, materialising as success and wellbeing in this life and victory over dark forces in the next. A sense of community and belonging is produced from representations of enclosure within a sacred world that must be extended to encompass the human globe. This forms into an imaginary of agreement, purity and difference from those that are 'unsaved.'²⁸ Lastly, divine hierarchies of God over man, man as head of church and household, and the human over creation produce an imaginary of a 'correct' social order. These imaginaries, forming the content of my first two dissertation chapters, overlap and combine to produce the orientations that create Lakewood's story-world. The third dissertation chapter concerns how these orienting imaginaries are communicated and experienced in occasionally disorienting ways. This structure is repeated in the experimental writing chapters of myth-ground, wall-skin and cloud-breath. These imaginaries exist throughout megachurch evangelicalism, with different emphases in different contexts, but Lakewood materialises and visualises them in intensely scalar, spectacular, performative and affective ways in a context where an 'outside' reality and an 'inside' story-world form a tension within the bodies of those who are not able to conform to these imaginaries. Both thesis and experimental text complicate these imaginaries with their opposites or exclusions, which are repressed

²⁷ I am interested in the collective alignment towards an authorised set of beliefs as both imaginary and reality. I recognize the diversity of response that might be engendered within a site like Lakewood, and do not wish to suggest it produces a complete homogeneity of belief. Laity are not passive receptacles, nor is belief fixed in the believer, but ebbs and flows over time. Jill Stevenson writes that: 'studies of religious media reveal a multidirectional, ongoing, and dynamic process of meaning-making in which users are not always in agreement and regularly express resistance.' (Jill Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First Century America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 18) There is an emphasis within evangelicalism on believers' own spiritual journey, on reading and hearing God's voice for themselves, but ultimately there is a tension between individual agency and the identity of evangelical which necessities remaining within the confines of orthodoxy as imagined by the church. I do not interrogate the varied levels of dis/engagement with the site in terms of actual members, although the numbers and scale of Lakewood speaks for itself. Within this thesis are no interviews with participants, only my research into and multi-sensory analysis of the visual and material culture of the evangelical church as an evangelical artist. I have attempted to not overlay it with my own former experiences of charismatic evangelicalism and to recognize Lakewood in its singularity, to engage with it on its own terms, to retain an openness to the texts and beliefs within the site so that I can explore the ways in which these texts impact my dis/believing body.

²⁸ Although this sense of inside and out less rigidly defined than in many religious institutions, see Chapter Two.

in the church as profane, lesser, heretical. The multivalence of material reality challenges Lakewood's story-world.

The total artwork (performance, design, lighting and imagery) of the worship service in the Sanctuary that communicates these imaginaries produces affective atmospheres, experienced as a 'climate of belief.' The believing body is seduced and enticed, but the reality of the sensory body and its visceral materiality is excluded from the imaginary of the binary hierarchy of transcendent spirituality over earthly, and earthy matter. The collective atmospheres produced in the worship service form a tension with the meteorological atmosphere in which believing bodies are entangled. The bodies inside this climate of belief are subject to volatile weather and polluted air and water. They also weather unequally. Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Mae Hamilton's concept of 'weathering'²⁹ conceptualizes how body, site and the weather enmesh in a world threatened by climate-change. Weathering considers how bodies are socially, culturally, politically and materially differentiated. Despite the fact that climate change has implications for everyone, climate crisis disproportionately impacts along gender, race, class, ableist and colonial lines. Neimanis and Hamilton also consider weathering a strategy, a way to pay attention to how bodies and sites make and respond weather and to consider how we might weather differently. Neimanis and Hamilton write:

Weather is pervasive in ways that makes distinctions between the meteorological and the social rather leaky, not unlike the much-critiqued nature/culture divide... weathering means learning to live with the changing conditions of rainfall, drought, heat, thaw and storm as never separable from the 'total climate' of social, political and cultural existence of bodies.³⁰

Neimanis and Hamilton's concept can be applied to Lakewood's story-world. Here the cultural imaginaries (informed by a wider social and political context) of enclosure, well-being and the certainty of good things to come produce affective atmospheres, a climate of belief that, whilst arising from weathering bodies, also directs attention away from the destabilised meteorological climate. These orienting imaginaries are problematic within the context of climate crisis, with extreme weather events occurring ever more frequently within its locale. Lakewood's largely Latinx and Black congregants are likely to suffer the most from rising sea levels, pollutants, extreme weather events and increased drought and heat. I argue that Lakewood's leadership, in continually reproducing the status quo of the wider context of a capitalism that preserves structural inequality and resource depletion, continue to perpetuate colonialism and fail to act on their exhortations of love for their congregants. The story-world of Lakewood requires transformation.

A shift towards a renewed examination of materiality (particularly within feminist scholarship – Barad, Braidotti, Hayles et al.)³¹ has begun to question the binaries of our Western epistemologies, binaries which are often replicated in the megachurch. This shift constitutes a recognition of how materiality is active, agentic, and

²⁹ Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Mae Hamilton, 'Weathering', *Feminist Review* 118, no. 1 (April 2018): 80–84, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0097-8>.

³⁰ Neimanis & Hamilton, 'Weathering', 83.

³¹ Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2013); N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

enmeshed with human embodiment, noting how the human is interconnected and interdependent with an enveloping world. For example, Stacey Alaimo's concept of 'transcorporeality' states that the human body is inseparable from nature, and argues that: 'the movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual.'³² Alaimo's approach reflects the work of wider feminist scholarship that challenges the easy separations of culture and nature, of the biological, ecological and the political. I show that these arenas are not discrete at Lakewood, but overlap and combine within its climate of belief.

I attempt to take up Alaimo's charge of producing complex modes of analysis in my research, recognising the weathering body at Lakewood (and the climate as an enveloping body) as both actant and acted upon, as an entity that is porous and open to transformation. Neimanis, in addition to 'weathering,' advocates a 'hydrofeminism' to enable us to think our embodiment as watery, and to highlight our relationality and responsibility across different watery bodies. She writes that it is a necessary method for resisting enlightenment individualism: 'As watery, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: *I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation.*'³³ For Neimanis, this 'hydrologic' flows 'through and across difference' blurring the boundary between the individual and the other.³⁴ These ideas form both a method in the project and an opening up of possibility, a way to reorient and transform the building-body of Lakewood through a dissolution of boundary separations.

Similar to Neimanis' hydrologic, Nancy Tuana's term 'Viscous Porosity' proposes that material which passes through a body is sticky: it enmeshes with and transforms the body, shaping who we are. In 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,' Tuana demonstrates how an extreme weather event such as Hurricane Katrina brings to the fore our interdependence on and interaction with human and ecological systems. Rather than solely focussing on the human bodies of those affected by Katrina in New Orleans, Tuana includes the embodiment of levees, hurricanes and swamps, and the stickiness, or 'viscous porosity' of the interactions between all these bodies, with no hard and fast divide between the natural and the social. Tuana writes that: 'the boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in is porous.'³⁵ The detail of the aftermath of Katrina and its devastations is laid forcefully out in Rebecca Solnit's investigative book 'A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster.' Solnit's research and writing demonstrates that it is not only our bodies enmeshed in our ecological contexts, but that our beliefs – importantly, our wrongly held, unexamined beliefs based on misinformation, fear and desire – also contribute to both the occurrence of these events and the human and more-than-human suffering in their wake.³⁶ Lakewood has been subject to flooding during Hurricane Harvey, and other hurricanes negatively impact the homes, businesses and bodies of its

³² Stacy Alaimo 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and The Ethical Space of Nature' in Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 238.

³³ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Environmental Cultures Series. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 96.

³⁴ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 102.

³⁵ Nancy Tuana, 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,' in Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 198.

³⁶ Rebecca Solnit. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 231-304.

membership, but climate scepticism along religious and politically partisan lines produces a passivity in the face of oncoming catastrophe.

These scholars foreground how our environments are not a passive backdrop to human activity but how we are reciprocally constituted with them. Belief is not an abstract or private phenomenon, but writes itself into the conditions of our existence. In a context of rapidly worsening weather and destabilising ecological conditions the need to examine the interaction of the material world and belief, specifically how it is produced and embedded within the body, is pressing. In my experimental writing, the flood, drawing on Biblical and other mythological traditions, works to highlight this interconnected embodiment. It also acts as both a metaphor for the global crowd and a transformation of the church.

Lakewood's Imaginaries in the Context of North American Megachurch Evangelicalism

The imaginaries of comfort, progress, belonging and order³⁷ manifest in specific ways at Lakewood, but can also be seen within the broader context of North American megachurch evangelicalism.³⁸

Belonging is arguably the key aspect of evangelicalism at large in its' emphasis on membership growth. Beyond its particularities of history and culture, Lakewood arguably visualises and materialises the global evangelical movement in its idealized form as an ever-expanding body. The etymology of 'evangelical' is Greek for 'good news.' Conversionism (the belief in the spreading of the gospel to the ends of the earth through telling others the good news of Jesus Christ) is one of the central tenets of evangelicalism. David Bebbington defines evangelicalism through four key beliefs - Biblicalism: the truth of the Bible; Crucicentrism: the need for the atonement of Christ; Conversionism: the need for all of humanity to be converted; and Activism: the need to act on the truth of the gospel.³⁹ Conversionism foregrounds the absolute necessity of saving all of humanity, of bringing the globe into the bounds of the church. All Protestants who believe they have been born again and who subscribe to the 'great commission' (the duty to evangelize the nations) could claim to be evangelicals. Whilst American evangelicalism is not a monoculture, it arose historically from a series of revivals starting in the 18th Century, known as the Great Awakenings, that impacted almost all denominations to become a democratic and populist movement.

From 1970 to 2021, the global growth of the number of evangelicals grew at a faster rate (180%) than global population growth (119%). Along with Pentecostals and Charismatics, evangelicalism is the fastest-growing religious group, apart from Islam, at 192%.⁴⁰ There are approximately 600 million evangelicals represented by the

³⁷ I don't wish to suggest this is an exhaustive list, but these pertain to the embodied – spatial, material, visual - experience of Lakewood megachurch most overtly.

³⁸ Whilst not all megachurches are evangelical—the vast majority of protestant mainline denominations have at least one megachurch—many megachurches, both denominational and non-denominational, hold beliefs consistent with evangelicalism.

³⁹ See Bebbington's quadrilateral definition of Evangelicalism: David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. (London: Routledge, 1995), 2-17.

⁴⁰ See 'Annual Statistics: Status of Global Christianity 2021', Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, accessed 3rd March 2021, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/resources/status-of-global-christianity/>.

World Evangelical Alliance, a global network of churches across 129 nations.⁴¹ The United States has the highest levels of Christian faith in the Western world.⁴² It also has the largest concentration of evangelicals, mostly based in the Bible Belt in which Lakewood is situated. Evangelicalism is also the dominant form of religious expression in the United States with estimates ranging between 25.4% (2014 Pew Religious Landscape survey) and 37% (2019 Gallup survey) of the population identifying as evangelical or ‘born again’ Christians.⁴³ As a result, US evangelicals form a significant voting block and wield considerable political and socio-cultural power relative to the more minority position of evangelicals in the UK. Whilst globally evangelicalism continues to spread, church attendance is beginning to falter in North America. Lakewood weekly attendance currently averages 43,500 (down from a high of 52,000) but it has a huge influence world-wide, with 7 million watching TV broadcast weekly across 100 nations, and 4 million globally engaging on social media. There are currently approximately 90 ‘gigachurches’ that exceed 10,000 congregants per week.⁴⁴ This global influence acts within the imaginaries of evangelicalism as an indicator of divine favour and authorisation of the movement’s activities and produces a sense of belonging to a vast body.⁴⁵ Megachurches also offer a wide range of community services, groups and religious education, embedding the believer in the life of the church. Such churches are known as ‘full service’ or seven-day-a-week churches.⁴⁶ Matthew Wade designates the Hillsong megachurch brand as a ‘total institution.’⁴⁷

Comfort materialises within American megachurch evangelicalism in a number of ways. Non-denominational evangelical megachurches such as Lakewood tend to present low tension with the surrounding secular culture, enabling the unchurched and religious seekers to feel at ease once inside the bounds of the site and the ever-growing embrace of global evangelicalism.⁴⁸ 55% of megachurches in the US and all those outside the US are in Thumma and Travis’s category of ‘Seeker’ and ‘Charismatic/ pastor-focused’. Seeker churches (30%) represent

⁴¹ See ‘Who We Are’ World Evangelical Alliance, accessed 16th September 2021, <https://www.worldea.org/>.

⁴² Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 175.

⁴³ See ‘America’s Changing Religious Landscape’, The Pew Research Centre, accessed 16th September 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>; and ‘Religion’, *Gallup*, accessed 16th September 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

⁴⁴ See ‘The Definition of a Megachurch’ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed 13th September, 2021 <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> and ‘Megachurch database’ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed 13th September 2022, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>.

⁴⁵ 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. 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). 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 (Warren Bird, ‘Global Megachurches by Leadership Network’, accessed 12th June 2022, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1IXTV6DcjAa190mWQitglsWgg3Tdhhb14iBHa7EqquzZE/edit#gid=1496833091>). In the US, megachurches are undergoing a rapid increase in size. 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. Stephen Ellingson, ‘New Research on Megachurches: Non-denominationalism and Sectarianism’ in Bryan Turner *New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2010), 248. See also Marion Maddox, “‘In the Goofy Parking Lot’: Growth Churches as a Novel Religious Form for Late Capitalism”, *Social Compass* 59, no. 2 (June 2012): 146–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768612440954>. Maddox considers the growth imperative of megachurches in contrast to studying them in relation to size. Explicitly connecting these religious institutions to their social, economic and political context of late capitalism, Maddox states that: ‘a key feature of such churches, running through all dimensions, is their unwaveringly forward-looking, growth-oriented vision, which must already be firmly in place while the church membership is still miniscule, even double, figures... the term ‘growth churches’ captures their defining ethos, whatever their size or stage of development.’ p. 148.

⁴⁶ Megachurches have caused mid-sized churches to reduce in size, see: Scott Thumma, ‘Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their characteristics and cultural context’, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed 6th June 2022, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html.

⁴⁷ Wade, ‘Seeker-friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution,’ 663.

⁴⁸ Congregants tend to be middle class, educated professional young people and young families, see: Ellingson, ‘New Research on Megachurches,’ 249. The majority of megachurches in the US are located in the suburbs of the Sunbelt states, see: Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America’s Largest Churches*, 1st ed (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 11.

those tailored to the unchurched, especially those alienated by traditional organized religion. The charismatic and/ or pastor focused category (25%), designates where the charisma and fame of the main pastor is emphasized reflecting the wider culture of celebrity.⁴⁹

The adoption of the appearance of contemporary culture within the megachurch produces an appealing familiarity, for example utilising the latest marketing and branding strategies, social media and cutting-edge audio-visual technologies.⁵⁰ These play a part in communicating and disseminating practical and therapeutic preaching centring on self-actualisation and positive thinking rather than Biblical exegesis.⁵¹ The preacher's therapeutic, quasi-religious narrative provides a means to cement a new identity as an individual within a global crowd, offsetting the disorientation of rapid social and political change in contemporary culture.⁵² D.G. Hart writes that evangelicalism has: 'been one of the most modern and innovative forms of Christianity in using the cultural vernacular to restate claims of an ancient faith in a modern tongue.'⁵³ Megachurch evangelicalism continues to thrive in part due to its ability, whilst repeatedly reinforcing the core message of salvation, to adapt to different contexts, appearing anti-institutional, therapeutic and contemporary. It eases the transition into religious community for the religious seeker by avoiding overt religious symbolism (there are no visible crucifixes or images of Christ at Lakewood other than in the shop), and judgemental fundamentalist or Pentecostal approaches toned down. The entertainment and spectacle of the megachurch worship service, combined with its grounding story-world, translates into pleasurable and meaningful embodied experience. Jill Stevenson highlights that direct, personal experience of God is important within American evangelicalism,⁵⁴ and writes that: 'there is a distinct resonance between what megachurches offer and what many contemporary Americans desire.'⁵⁵

'Progress,' comfort and choice combine in the megachurch in its replication of consumer capitalism and a focus on worldly success.⁵⁶ American megachurches are frequently housed within buildings that look like shopping

⁴⁹ Charismatic/ pastor focussed churches like Lakewood (although it also caters to religious seekers) tend towards racial and ethnic diversity and are most likely to disseminate their services and products through television ministries and sales to the Christian marketplace. Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 37-40.

⁵⁰ See Miranda Klaver, 'Media Technology Creating "Sermonic Events." The Hillsong Megachurch Network', *CrossCurrents*, 65: 4, (2015): pp. 422-433. doi: [10.1111/cros.12164](https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12164); Matthew Wade, 'Seeker-friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution', *Journal of Sociology*, 52: 4, (2016): pp. 661-676. doi: [10.1177/1440783315575171](https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783315575171). Whilst the Australian megachurch brand Hillsong embodies its' own particular history and culture, there are a number of parallels with Lakewood. They are both charismatic evangelical non-denominational megachurches with a drive to globalize and deploy technology, social media and marketing strategies to do so.

⁵¹ See Katja Rakow, 'Therapeutic Culture and Religion in America', *Religion Compass*, 7(11), (2013): pp. 485-497; Katja Rakow, 'Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen's "Message of Hope".' in Jan Stievermann, Philip Goff, and Detlef Junker (eds.) *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵² The non-denominationalism of many megachurches allows religious consumers the freedom not to be tied to a particular denominational 'brand' within the Christian marketplace. Within a largely secular 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. See Ellingson, 'New Research on Megachurches,' 253.

⁵³ D.G. Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 175.

⁵⁴ Jill Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First Century America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 12.

⁵⁵ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 180.

⁵⁶ See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Marion Maddox, 'Prosper, Consume and Be Saved'. *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 1 (April 2013): pp. 108-15.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303213476108>; George Sanders, 'Religious Non-Places: Corporate Megachurches and Their Contributions to Consumer Capitalism?'. *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 1 (January 2016): pp. 71-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531605> and others.

malls.⁵⁷ A significant proportion of megachurches are led by wealthy entrepreneurial pastors (“pastorpreneurs”)⁵⁸ who run their churches like CEOs, employing business and marketing strategies to enable their churches to grow in members, wealth and influence. The untrammelled growth of the megachurch appears as divine authorisation and favour. This growth has run in tandem with the rise of global capitalism and the ascendancy of America to global power in the last century. Joel Osteen, senior pastor of Lakewood Church, is a best-selling author, Christian celebrity and multi-millionaire. According to Luke Phillip Sinitiere he is America’s leading Christian minister.⁵⁹ The Christian marketplace for books, music, conferences, training and products has expanded, alongside the preaching of the ‘prosperity gospel’—the supposed Biblical basis for health and wealth—creating an emphasis on success, wellbeing and positive thinking. In her examination of this phenomenon, Kate Bowler categorises Lakewood as a prosperity gospel megachurch.⁶⁰ At Lakewood, as elaborated in Chapter One, this imaginary of progress is channelled into a repeated emphasis on transcending human limitations, on looking *through* problems at the human level toward divine possibility. This directs attention toward an imagined realm of achievement in this life and heavenly victory in the eternal one. This orientation looks through material reality, it directs the believers gaze toward images of the sky or cosmos that function as a window onto an imagined celestial perfection. This perfection is always materialising, believers only need to muster the faith to declare and claim it.

Whilst evangelicalism is a broad, heterogeneous group consisting of various traditions and not all evangelicals are conservative, American megachurches tend towards a combination of orthodox evangelical and socially and politically conservative theologies.⁶¹ A sense of order materialises in imaginaries of a divine hierarchy of God over man, and the human as the divinely ordained pinnacle of creation. Furthermore, the Bible is frequently interpreted to create further socially conservative hierarchies based on gender, sexuality, race and ableism. The top sixty-six American megachurches by size are run by men, reflecting a generally patriarchal culture.⁶² White traditionalist evangelicals⁶³ are both socially and politically conservative and historically entangled with

⁵⁷ See Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2003); Susan Bratton, *ChurchScape: Megachurches and the Iconography of Environment* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016); George Sanders, ‘Religious Non-Places’, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531605>.

⁵⁸ ‘Pastorpreneur’ coined by John Jackson in *Pastorpreneur: Pastors and Entrepreneurs Answer the Call* (Friendswood, Texas: Baxter Press, 2003), 2.

⁵⁹ Phillip. L. Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 8. Aside from an incident involving an airline hostess unsuccessfully attempting to sue Victoria Osteen for assault (see James C. McKinley Jr., ‘Jury Finds Pastor Did Not Assault a Flight Attendant’ New York Times, accessed 6th June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/us/15houston.html>), the Osteen family have been almost untouched by the scandals that seem to befall many other prominent evangelical leaders. They are, however, critiqued from a range of positions, by Christians for preaching Bible-lite, or a ‘cotton-candy’ gospel, and by both Christians and non-Christians for their prosperity gospel message and wealth (see Bob Hunter, ‘Osteen’s Gospel-Light Message’ *Christian Research Journal*, volume 31, number 3 (2008); Kate Bowler, ‘Here’s Why People Hate Joel Osteen’ *The Washington Post*, accessed 6th June 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/29/heres-why-people-hate-joel-osteen/>). They courted controversy during Hurricane Harvey for what appeared to be a refusal to open the site up to those displaced by the flooding. This criticism was addressed and the Mayor of Houston recognised the church with a proclamation for their help in Hurricane relief efforts (see Samuel Smith, ‘Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church Honored by Houston Mayor for Hurricane Harvey Recovery Efforts’ *The Christian Post*, accessed 6th June 2022, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/joel-osteen-lakewood-church-honored-houston-mayor-hurricane-harvey-recovery-efforts.html>).

⁶⁰ Bowler, *Blessed*, 4, 75, 125.

⁶¹ Ellingson, ‘New Research on Megachurches,’ 247.

⁶² ‘Database of Megachurches in the U.S.’ Hartford Institute for Religion Research, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*&sb=3&so=descend

⁶³ Robin Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate Change*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 3.

Republicanism.⁶⁴ 81% of White evangelicals voted for Trump as president,⁶⁵ proving decisive in his success, and creating an exodus of people of colour from predominantly White, Republican supporting evangelical congregations.⁶⁶ The Christian Right, ‘a politically conservative subset of evangelical and Catholic leaders allied closely with the Republican Party’⁶⁷ are a small but vocal and influential group. They take the Bible literally and hope to restore Christian values in American law and culture to form a theocracy. The Christian Right act to shape politics on the basis that Anglo-Christian identity is under threat from ungodly enemies including progressive secularism.⁶⁸

The influence of the Christian Right on White evangelicalism as a voting bloc has led to ‘culture wars’ over a number of issues, including education, sexual and reproductive rights and gun control. Evangelicals have therefore developed an ‘embattled’ mentality: a perception of being culturally under attack and that they must fight for the Christian soul of the nation. Climate crisis has also formed into a defining issue of evangelical identity. Whilst evangelical attitudes to the profane, natural world outside of the ‘sacred’ space of the church are shaped by cultural and theological factors, Globus Veldman has highlighted how Christian Right leadership has deployed a large-scale campaign in the evangelical mass media to suggest that the crisis is nothing more than a liberal hoax.⁶⁹ This message reaches millions of global evangelical Christians daily, increasing scepticism within American evangelicalism at large toward climate crisis and denying the impact of human activity on the ecological crisis. Furthermore, Bjork-James reveals how an obsession with eschatological End Times theology in her study of evangelical laity in Colorado Springs impacts on belief towards climate crisis, creating a culture in which God is conceived of as a divine life boat, carrying believers away from a world destined for destruction. Stevenson writes that End Times theology is: ‘a highly-visible aspect of the evangelical subculture.’⁷⁰

Whilst many megachurches are monoracial and 90% of US evangelicals are White,⁷¹ Lakewood is notable for its racial diversity.⁷² Non-denominational evangelical megachurches like Lakewood are more likely to be diverse

⁶⁴ See Francis FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 292; also Angela Denker, *Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. (New York: BasicBooks, 1991) et al.

⁶⁵ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, ‘White evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, exit polls show’ *Washington Post*, accessed 7th March 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly-for-donald-trump/?utm_term=.0d2a0eb26cdb.

⁶⁶ Campbell Robertson, ‘A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches’ *New York Times*, accessed 11th November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/blacks-evangelical-churches.html>

⁶⁷ Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 3-4.

⁶⁸ See Roger Chapman, and Ciment, James, *Culture Wars: An Encyclopaedia of Issues, Viewpoints and Voices* (Routledge, 2015); Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. (London: Vintage, 2008) et al.

⁶⁹ See Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism* for a sustained discussion of the historical, political and social origins of climate skepticism amongst white traditionalist evangelicals.

⁷⁰ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 9.

⁷¹ Michael O. Emerson, and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

⁷² Ellingson points out some important distinctions between African-American megachurches that make up 10% of American megachurches and those that are predominantly white. African-American megachurches are more likely to be denominational (the largest portion being Baptist 46%), and are situated in urban rather than suburban areas. Their social outreach tends to be more developed. Whilst some white churches have community development corporations, Black megachurches are more likely to foster them and extend these services further to credit unions, building affordable and transitional housing, health clinics and job training programmes (see Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, ‘Get on board, little children, there’s room for many more: The Black Megachurch Phenomenon’ *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* (2001) 29: 177-203, 191-5). A further important distinction is the incorporation in many Black majority churches of a Black theological interpretation and an African-centred worldview (see Ellingson, ‘New Research on Megachurches,’ 250).

than mainline congregations, reflecting their urban/exurban locations,⁷³ yet structural racism is yet to be adequately addressed from the pulpit by White church leaders⁷⁴ and racism is unwittingly perpetuated by well-meaning White evangelicals.⁷⁵ Despite Black, Latinx (reflecting its Pentecostal heritage) and female speakers and worship leaders frequently appearing on stage, there remains within Lakewood both Biblical literalism (the Bible as inerrant) and an implicit conservatism.⁷⁶ In its messages, Lakewood leadership tends not venture into other topics beyond salvation and individual responsibility for life circumstances. Whilst Osteen is famed for his refusal to be drawn on political or contentious issues, political scientists Wald and Hill found that even without including overt political content in sermons, churches still conveyed political attitudes to members, creating a convergence in congregants' beliefs and attitudes over time.⁷⁷

The world of evangelicalism is expansionist but creates a cultural hermeticism, a defined sense of inside and out and human-divine hierarchies and categories. The repetition of the evangelical narrative of a linear teleology of success, wellbeing and progress toward the eventual return of the messiah forms a set of imaginaries in which the believer is subsumed.

Dissertation Chapters and 'There is a Miracle in Your Mouth'

The two texts, one theoretical, the other experimental, address different readers but mirror one another in chapter and content. The different approaches and methods contribute to knowledge via different writing practices, one adhering to academic constraints, the other more personal and performative.

In the theoretical writing, I use Mieke Bal's three part narratological schema of 'narrative,' 'story,' and 'fabula,'⁷⁸ to map out the embodied orientations of these imaginaries and the affective atmospheres they produce, constituting Lakewood's story-world. Lakewood's narrative texts (including performance, design, lighting, architecture and music in addition to written or language based texts) produce a story. This story, inflected by wider cultural and political ideas, is therapeutic (comforting) and teleological (progress driven), creating a sense of enclosure and belonging, and an order of God over man with the leader as a representative of divine power. Lastly, the fabula, the embodied perception of this narrative and the atmospheres it gives rise to, produces a 'climate of belief.'

Sandra L. Barnes' analysis of the Black megachurch reveals a connection between liberation theologies and black empowerment (see Sandra L. Barnes, *Black Megachurch Culture: Models for Education and Empowerment* (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010).

⁷³ Kimberly Karnes, Wayne McIntosh, Irwin L. Morris, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. 'Mighty Fortresses: Explaining the Spatial Distribution of American Megachurches'. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 2 (June 2007): pp. 261–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2007.00355.x>.

⁷⁴ Robertson, 'A Quiet Exodus', <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/blacks-evangelical-churches.html>

⁷⁵ Emerson and Smith. *Divided by Faith*, 1.

⁷⁶ As a legacy church handed down through the family from father to son, at Lakewood the male heir is still the head of the church and it is still largely men who preach. A quick glance down the list of megachurch leadership (megachurches ordered by size) reveals that they are overwhelmingly led by men. The top sixty-six megachurches in America by size are all led by men (see 'Database of Megachurches in the U.S.' (American Megachurches by Size), Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed 8th June 2022, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*&sb=3&so=descend). Whilst wives and female worship leaders play an active role, they tend to demur to the male leader. Heterosexual marriage and the traditional family structure are promoted, reflecting evangelical conservative values.

⁷⁷ Kenneth D. Wald, Dennis E. Owen and Samuel S. Hill Jr., 'Churches as Political Communities'. *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (June 1988): pp. 531–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1957399>.

⁷⁸ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

In Chapter One I examine what constitutes the ‘story,’ setting out its context within a wider evangelical culture that is oriented towards foundational texts and metaphors of God as a stable ground. I outline Lakewood’s story as both therapeutic in its’ adoption of its secular context of the wellness industry and positive thinking, and teleological in its sky-bound fixation toward victory for believers in this life and the next.

In Chapter Two I consider Lakewood’s narrative texts (lighting, imagery, stage design and architecture) and the visual, material and spatial ways the story is communicated. These create hierarchical imaginaries of vertical transcendence, an orientation toward a transcendent God ‘on high,’ and a horizontal containment through the church as distinctly different. I examine the imaginaries of enclosure through the site as a total institution and a total artwork, communicating implicit ideas and beliefs, but demonstrate that in reality it is in a porous exchange with the secular world outside its’ bounds, infiltrated by its cultural, political and ecological contexts. I set out how the narrative texts both mimic and occlude the more-than-human world.



Fig. 2. Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

In the final chapter I explore the fabula of Lakewood through a performative ontology, and the influence of the Word of Faith movement (a moniker for the Prosperity Gospel, or occasionally ‘Name It and Claim It’)⁷⁹ and its

⁷⁹ These terms are used interchangeably. I prefer to use ‘Word of Faith’ in relation to Lakewood, partly to emphasize the focus on faith filled vocalisation, but also as a better summation of the church culture than the term ‘prosperity gospel’ which places more emphasis on

belief in faith-filled vocalization. I consider how bodily orientations are produced through rhythmic and spatial alignment towards language and other narrative texts, creating an affective force field within the Sanctuary, an atmosphere that appears as an authentic divine encounter. Within the power relations of Lakewood, where the leader instrumentalises the total work of art toward the transmission of religious, political and social ideas, I argue that the fabula of affective atmospheres in the Sanctuary produces a ‘climate of belief.’ In this climate, atmospheric imaginaries of stability and victory form a tension with unequally weathering bodies in an unstable meteorological atmosphere. I situate this within the eschatology of the evangelical movement, an obsession with End Times theology, creating a variously dismissive attitude toward the environment and climate. I examine what implications that might have in a locale where extreme weather events pose an ever greater threat to a city situated on the wetlands of the Gulf Coast, risking a rupture of Lakewood, destabilising the ground beneath believers’ feet, and where climate crisis disproportionately affects worshippers along lines of gender, race and disability.



Fig. 3. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood worship during ‘Seeing Beyond the Logical,’ Lakewood Church Service, Sunday 3rd April 2022, available at 15.03 mins – 19.25 mins: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>)

Lastly I draw on new materialist thought to consider the dis/believing body as a porous entity in a web of relations, impacted by and impacting on the world around it, and the necessity of addressing the power relations present in the creation of story-worlds as they shape and inscribe our material grounds. I argue that a transformation of the megachurch will occur in the dissolution of its tidy separations of inside and out through a watery inundation, and examine the potential of a speculative, experimental writing practice to remake the evangelical story-world.⁸⁰

wealth. As demonstrated in Chapter One, Joel Osteen is not the most wealth obsessed or extravagant of leaders within this loose movement within Protestant Christianity.

⁸⁰ I refer to God throughout as a capitalized ‘He’. This is not because I agree with the gendering of God, but because I carry with me this gendering from past experience, and pointedly include it to show the gender bias that continues to be repeatedly as a constant background within evangelicalism.

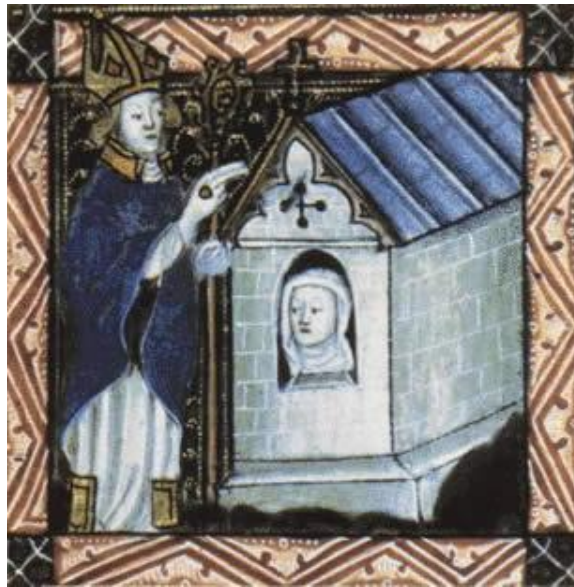


Fig. 4. Depiction of a bishop blessing an anchoress found in the manuscript, MS 079: Pontifical, held at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and dated c. 1400 and c. 1410, unknown artist. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons (available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CCCC_MS_79_fol72r_300px.jpg).

Within my practice based, experimental writing the dis/believing, dis/oriented body is entangled with a sacred/profane world. I highlight this by drawing three sites into a relationship, all of which have approximately the same square footage: my writing room, the rotating golden sculpture of the globe at Lakewood (a microcosmic metaphor for the wider site), and the cell of medieval anchorite, mystic and first woman to be published in the English language, St Julian of Norwich. I write my faith-loss into the building-body of Lakewood by drawing on the medieval church practice of bricking up anchorites (female religious hermits) into a small cell for the remainder of their lives. I become the building, interred within the fixity of concrete building foundations. Its bricks become my skin. The building-body of Lakewood experiences watery dreams, moving from rigidity to flux, immersed in and transformed by the fluid catastrophe of a flood, returning to the earthy muck of compost where the ‘oddkin’⁸¹ reside. Its heretical female embodiment becomes a foil to the dominating, sky-bound male voice of Lakewood’s patrilineal leadership. I align with theorist Donna Haraway to resist: ‘the sterilising narrative of wiping the world clean by apocalypse or salvation.’⁸² Overwriting evangelicalism’s teleological narrative, I am situated in the partial and deviating perspective of my body as a dis/identifying insider/outsider.

Methodology

In addition to drawing on past experience of twenty years involvement within evangelicalism and seven years involvement in a UK church of over 2,000 members at its peak, I write both in and after site visits to Lakewood and other churches from the partial perspective of my dis/believing body. I pay close attention to the sensations and thoughts that arise from the reciprocity of body and environment.⁸³ I recognise my body as a porous,

⁸¹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.

⁸² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 150.

⁸³ Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), (1988): 575. doi: [10.2307/3178066](https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066).

mutable entity open to stories and their visual, material and spatial communication. I acknowledge my participation in affective atmospheres. I note what has provoked sensations of stability or overwhelm how my body is made to feel both oriented and disoriented within the site, how this extends out through the porous boundary of the site in relation to a de/stabilised ground. Both theoretical and experimental writing is informed less by phenomenology which centres the human and more by feminist new materialism. I align with Astrida Neimanis to write a posthuman feminist form of phenomenology—not phenomenology ‘proper’ but an expanded form where I am decentred and recognise my entanglement in a complex web of relations.⁸⁴

Wider research into the constructed and animate world both inside and outside of Lakewood fleshes out my writing. The thick sub-tropical humidity of Houston snaked through with the swampy bayou in hurricane season and its coastal topography threatened by flooding and subsidence, is contrasted with the vast air-conditioned, artificially lit space of the Sanctuary, a spectacular stadium for 16,800 bodies that is frequently awash with atmospheric emotion. David Abram distinguishes between the constructed world of human design and the animate world, believing that the human-made world quickly loses its ability to speak and enchant.⁸⁵ Lakewood makes use of both artificial and performative animacy to create affective atmospheres which speak to and enchant the body of believers in a powerful and durational way. A theatre of mimicry is constructed, through design echoing natural phenomena, often to hypernatural effect, via lighting, set, imagery, acoustics and a variety of texts. This mimicry images an idealized world within the Sanctuary, highlighting the world-building at work. I note the effects of this oversaturated hyperreality on both sensation and thought, how the site impacts my ambiguously Exvangelical body.

Lakewood’s narrative is mediated and materialises as both a grounding orientation and an enclosing atmosphere that transforms identities. This is an imaginary of difference that contradicts its adoption of secular contexts. Pointing out that different gatherings of objects create different grounds, Ahmed asks: ‘what difference does it make “what” we are oriented toward?’⁸⁶ These orientations aren’t only instrumentalised toward the believer identifying as Christian or even evangelical, but as a specifically Lakewoodian type of Christian, fully inflected with a contemporary American-Christian identity, capitalism and socio-political conservatism. Both forms of writing in this thesis seek to answer: what is the embodied experience within the space of a worship service at Lakewood? How is belief transmitted and embedded via the communication of a set of imaginaries and what are the ramifications of these beliefs? How might Lakewood be imagined otherwise, particularly from the perspective of the disorientations of dis/identification?

In my experimental writing, I write the building-body of Lakewood as an atmospheric, saturated milieu. Presently, it is immersed in an atmospheric mass of affective bodies, but the site may also encounter a future watery immersion if sea levels continue to rise. Subsidence in Houston is an accelerating problem, along with the steady encroachment of the sea into shrinking shorelines. Melody Jue approaches the ocean as a ‘disorientation

⁸⁴ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 22-26.

⁸⁵ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 64.

⁸⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.

device' for theory and philosophy, a: 'milieu that denatures our normative habits of orienting to the (terrestrial) world through language.⁸⁷ For Jue, language has taken form in environments where horizontality and gravity of movement hold sway.⁸⁸ Thinking through seawater estranges and dislocates us, enabling us to think outside our normative environs. Although Lakewood is a space thoroughly inflected by its' context, Jue's 'milieu specific analysis,' in which she explores the difference between terrestrial and oceanic frameworks for thinking and being, provides a tool to consider the imaginary of difference and belonging space in the church, delimited through consecration, to the secular/ profane world outside.⁸⁹ Lakewood's Sanctuary is regularly immersed in a fluid climate of affect, generated by the impact of its' story-world on the crowd. Its' imaginaries turn believers' gaze away from the incoming wash of the ocean, and a sky that is frequently heavy with threatening levels of precipitation.

If Lakewood's narrative primarily functions as a form of orientation in relation to a stable ground (whilst it is mediated in disorienting ways), I consider in my experimental writing what might Lakewood be in the disorientation of an oceanic submersion. How would language and legibility be differently produced? How would it affect the linear teleology of success that the terrestrial horizon produces in the megachurch? How might Lakewood rust, dissolve, chemically transform or becomes symbiotic with other life forms? My experimental writing is an exercise in dissolving the separations and binary thinking that frequently (but not always) make evangelicalism a distortion of the community, ideals, rituals, experiences I think I might be usefully retained within a future Church. The experimental writing imagines the megachurch in one possible future mode.

To think through orientation and to write the effects of disorientation, I have developed a practice of floating within the fluid abstraction of a sensory deprivation tank. The float tank is an enclosed, lidded container in which a persons naked body is suspended in a watery solution of Epsom salts heated to body temperature. At the start of a float session, the person puts earplugs in and turns the lights off, so that visual, aural, olfactory, taste and tactile sensations are reduced or eliminated. This has the potential to produce hypnagogia, the brain state of falling asleep, an alternative/ transitional state of consciousness. This practice has allowed me to explore the limits and boundaries of my body, how my body reacts to the sense of disorientation brought on by having no ground to find a bearing in relation to, and to experience a series of visions brought on by the viscosity of the warm fluid. Images bloom out of the blackness in front of my mind's eye, a parallel of Julian of Norwich's 'showings,' her mystical visions that are also written as appearing in her 'mind's eye.'⁹⁰ Whilst the float tank is not the ocean with its particularities of pressure, temperature, salinity and movement, and despite its connection to surface and floating rather than immersion, the effects of an oscillatory disorientation inside the darkness and viscose fluidity of the float tank give rise to hallucinations in which I feel myself to be underwater, morphing with aquatic life or being propelled along underground rivers and tunnels. At times, I dissolve or face erasure within abyss like spaces. This alternative, dream-like space has enabled me to orient away from the evangelical

⁸⁷ Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 6.

⁸⁸ Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 2.

⁸⁹ Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 3. See also Anna Strhan's sociological study of an evangelical Anglican church in London: Anna Strhan, *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals*, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁹⁰ Anthony C. Spearing and Elizabeth Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love* London (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), 7.

strictures imposed from the outside upon the body. From the containing, safe space of the salt water, it has allowed my thoughts to project both inwards and outwards, to face the deeper recesses of my consciousness but also to see myself in other bodies and sites. The imagery of the hallucinations forms the dreaming of the building-body within my text. Alternative states of consciousness through floating, meditation and psychedelics form a new spiritual practice that explores spirituality as a both brain state and an authentic experience.

Through my writing and research I attempt to undo: ‘the solid, the fixed, the reliable, the static’ habits of evangelical storytelling by reimagining the megachurch building as a dislocated, immersed body.⁹¹ In these threads I form a less stable version of the past and conjure possible futures. These versions are rendered through the frame of a dis/believing body in a fluid exchange with the world around it. The inundation of the flood, a metaphor for an expansive global crowd and the immersive space of the megachurch experience, serves to transform both Lakewood and myself, breaking us out of our binary thinking, our straightness and fixity. Writing itself is a form of orientation, and the work of the PhD, of excavating and understanding, has enabled me to rewrite my own story, orienting me out of evangelical imaginaries and into a more expansive, complex and mutable experience.

⁹¹ Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 14.

Chapter One: Lakewood's Orienting Story-World

April, 1992. Spring Harvest Christian Conference, Minehead, England. I am sixteen years old, standing with a group of friends within a crowd of a hundred young people at a youth worship event, part of an evangelical conference called Spring Harvest. The harvest will not be wheat, but us, the people. The large room is dark but lights flash out from the stage across the room, people are dancing and singing along to a band. The music is loud, upbeat. There is an air of excitement and expectation. A man on the stage speaks passionately to the crowd about Jesus, a perfect man, full of love and grace, giving up his life to save us from our fallenness. I have been attending the local church youth group for several months and have heard this story before, but in this time and place it takes on a new resonance. It has been a difficult few years. I am at the conference because I want to be with my friends on holiday. Very few of my friendship group have come from religious backgrounds, but all of them have recently become Christians. They say they have been 'saved,' although I'm unsure from exactly what. They seem happy. Until now I have been resisting. But now I am shifting, turning on my axis. Moved by the charged atmosphere and the emotive message I have felt a mixture of hope and vulnerability. The speaker invites anyone who is not a Christian to come to the front and to ask Jesus into their life. A group of volunteers wait to pray with those who take the step of faith. I respond to the altar call.

Behind the stage, amongst a group of teens and volunteers, I am prayed for by an older man. I tell him of my guilt, I tell him I know I am not a good person. I tell him I want Jesus to forgive me. He asks me to close my eyes and open out my palms in the gesture of receiving a gift. He also closes his eyes, and lays one hand on my shoulder, one hand over my head whilst he prays. His hand forms a hot weight. I ask Jesus into my life. I see a clear image behind my shut eyes, that I don't seem to have summoned, of Jesus standing before me holding out a small sack. Something black and viscous flows continuously out from my torso as the man prays. It flows into the sack. It is leeching out of me, a great, unspeakable volume of darkness. As the man finishes praying I seem to take control of the image and I make Jesus close the sack, although it seemed momentarily that it might never stop. After the prayer is finished and the man has moved on to the next young person, I feel an overwhelming elation. I walk through the crowds of teens who are dispersing after the event and re-join my friends. Despite the lateness of the evening and the dark room, I have a strong sensation of light coming from me, of visible light rays shining out from my body. Over the coming weeks and months I will feel as though there has been a deep shift within me. I believe I have experienced a revelation of the world as it literally is. This bigger story encloses me within a meaningful structure.

Telling stories is intrinsic to human experience. Historian Hayden White considers narrative a ‘universal structuring of meaning.’⁹² Archaeologist Christopher Tilley contends that: ‘narrative is not an option, it is an ontological status: we all live narratives.’⁹³ Stories enmesh with the bodies that read, hear or see them. The narrative forms through which stories are told encompass not only language and text, but image, sound, object and their combination. Stories provide an orientation within collectively constructed story-worlds. Affect and sensation arise and combine with meaning as the story is experienced and interpreted. As meaning is made, orientations are produced. When meaning is unmade or remade, bodily sensations of disorientation and reorientation may occur. In these story-worlds, beliefs are formed and actions produced in a feedback loop, sometimes cementing those beliefs, sometimes dissolving them.

Story-tellers narrate the world to locate themselves within it, to position themselves in relation to others and otherness, and in this an orientation is found. Narrative organises space and time into a coherent, navigable structure. It enables narrator and listener to order a bewildering and multivalent reality into something that can be understood and experienced as meaningful. In telling stories, things are ‘set straight;’ in authoring, stories become authorised. Actors and actants, causes and effects are assigned, making ‘this’ leading to ‘that’ permissible. Through repetition, narratives settle down into the solid grounds of enduring meaning. Abiding stories create a sense of reality, forming individual and collective identities and take on the solidity of a foundation upon which communities are built. Conversely, when these grounding narratives fail to be coherent, they can create a sense of disorder, disorientation and instability. But in the loss of one story’s coherence, other stories arise.

As story-telling produces sensations of meaningful orientation, sensations and affects can be experienced as fluidity. When spoken, it can create a shared atmospheric immersion within a meaningful soundscape for the listener. When read, the reader might become immersed within the story on the page. Language is woven into narrations felt as a thrill, a liquid current that passes through narrator and narratee. Stories shape shift with every telling, and are received through the perception of the individual, who inflects them with their own subjectivity. Story-telling, both as a navigational tool and as a mutable experience of imagining otherwise, is a world-building phenomenon.

The need to examine the story-worlds that dominate human identity and culture is pressing, to understand how they contribute to anthropogenic climate crisis. When story-worlds are human-centred, they overlook human ecological interdependence. In order to address and reorient away from anthropocentric belief and action, it is important to examine our normative, acculturated story-worlds, dominant orientations which occlude the knowledge that they are only one possible orientation among many.

⁹² Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174>, 7.

⁹³ Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 175.

Narrative Dis/Orientations

In this chapter I examine what constitutes the content of Lakewood's story. Evangelicalism, comparative to other traditions and movements of the Christian faith, foregrounds the telling and spreading of the gospel, the 'good news' message. The evangelical movement aims to tell this story to the ends of the earth, channelling it through the mouth of the evangelist, out through the crowd and into the world, where it shapes and inscribes cultural, political, and ecological grounds. The megachurch typically channels this narrative immersively during the worship service through a combination of spectacle, scale and performance. Taking the North American evangelical megachurch as the construction of a story-world of belief par excellence, I examine Lakewood church in Houston as one particular iteration of this.

In order to understand the telling of stories within Lakewood Church, I begin with Bal's definition of narrative.⁹⁴ Her three separations of 'story,' 'narrative' and 'fabula' form a useful structure with which to think through how Lakewood's story-world operates. Narrative relates to telling, to narration. The story is the content of that telling. For example, the basic story of Noah's Ark is widely known culturally, but this story can be narrated differently through song, imagery, text etc. Narrative refers to how the story is made communicable in its expression through a medium.⁹⁵ Bal defines narrative widely, stories may be communicated in a variety of media: '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.'⁹⁶ In this we can see that Lakewood's story-world isn't only formed of language, but also functions as an immersive, multi-sensory world, or a 'total artwork' as described in Chapter Two. It deploys a wide range of narrative forms that work in concert to create an embodied experience of its story. In addition to the communication of the Biblical narrative during preaching, through song lyrics, testimonies, performance, sound, lighting, stage and interior design, architecture, screen imagery, graphic design and branding all contribute to its story-world. This story-world is also globally disseminated through podcasts, streaming, social media, its website and published works, radio and television communications, touring and missions. Lastly, in Bal's schema the fabula provides the chronological elements of the story, the story's ordering of events, it's colouring, it's inflection:⁹⁷

The fabula is really the mental activity of the reading, the interpretation by the reader, an interpretation influenced both by the initial encounter with the text⁹⁸ and by the manipulations of the story. The fabula is the memory trace that remains after the reading is completed.⁹⁹

The fabula, therefore, could be said to be both the *way* the story is told and the embodied reception of the story: its affective force and interpretation.¹⁰⁰ These three elements of narrative, story and fabula are not separate in

⁹⁴ Bal, *Narratology*, 11. Bal recognises that interpretation is needed every step of the way in relation to how we understand stories, but that it is useful to have a system of interpretation, not to make the interpretation 'right' or correct, but to make interpretation arguable. An interpretation is always a proposal, but one, if it is valid, that should be well founded on evidence.

⁹⁵ Bal, *Narratology*, 9.

⁹⁶ Bal, *Narratology*, 5.

⁹⁷ Bal, *Narratology*, 5.

⁹⁸ Bal uses 'text' and 'artefact' interchangeably to cover the different forms through which narrative might occur.

⁹⁹ Bal, *Narratology*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ I expand on the link between fabula and fabulation in Chapter Three. For further elaboration on the concept of fabulation, see Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977) who first uses the term

practice but overlap and shift in a dynamic relation, between narrator, text and narratee. Sensations of existential, social and bodily orientation and disorientation may arise, dependent on the story, its telling and reception.

Lakewood's overarching message is a redemptive one inflected with North American identity and values and the context of neoliberalism. God will save the both the individual believer and the church body: if believers can muster hope and faith, aligning their attitude with the 'most high' God, material comfort and success will accrue. The church, shaped by its historical roots within the Pentecostal and Word of Faith movements (founded on the belief that believers are promised health and wealth, also known as the prosperity gospel), is one of wellbeing (a therapeutic narrative), and also on an inevitable movement toward victory and success (a teleological narrative). Lakewood's upward or sky-bound orientation - reaching high toward success in this life, combined with a final reigning in heaven with Jesus when He re-appears in the clouds at the 'End Times' to 'snatch up'¹⁰¹ believers – produces sensations of being fixed in place by a grounding story, separated from the disorientations of an ungodly world, but looking up to heaven for rescue and victory. Repetition of orienting metaphors and Lakewood's foundational myth stories, bracketed by the American evangelical narrative at large, forms a secure ground upon which a community is built. This orientation is experienced as a deeply felt certainty, a stability and a comfort. Looking upwards to a sky-bound, celestial future in this life and the next produces a hopeful expectation of the miraculous.

The linguistic and textual word historically takes precedence within Protestant forms of Christianity. However, the orienting construction of a divinely authored story is narrated through visual, material and spatial forms in both orienting and disorienting ways during the worship service. Lakewood's stories are brought to life through the performative power of the charismatic preacher and worship leaders that vocalise faith filled words. Furthermore, in the belief that speaking out in faith contains a miraculous power, the believer's speech produces both individual and collective affect in the Sanctuary. Narrative texts form the immersive multisensory experience of the story-world, perceived by the believer, producing affective response which works to transmit and inculcate belief. This leads to a dynamically affective atmosphere in which the embodied affects and sensations, understood as divine encounter, lead to belief formation. In the moment of divine encounter, the story is made fluid and alive, received like a current, a wash of affect into the body, a pleasurable disorientation, interpreted as an authentic religious experience. Through repetition and over duration, the story settles into the solid ground of myth, experienced as a steadying certainty in the body of the believer. Belief materialises in and through our embodied environments, shaping body and world reciprocally. Through this belief the material

fabulation in a philosophical sense to refer to a mode of the fictionalising of alternative worlds or 'myth-making' to create social cohesion. James Burton in, *The Philosophy of Science Fiction: Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) links philosophy and science fiction through bringing the work of Bergson into conversation with the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, and Ronald Bogue brings Bergsonian fabulation into a conversation with Deleuze in *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). For a discussion of critical fabulation as a critical writing methodology see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14. muse.jhu.edu/article/241115, 11.

¹⁰¹ 'Snatch up' – term used by Lisa Osteen Comes, 'Facing the Future without Fear Part 1: Signs of the End Times,' Lakewood Church Service, 10th March 2022, accessed 7th June 2022, available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/March/2022-03-09-1930-lisaosteencomes>. Based on: After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thes 4:17, New International Version).

world is re/ordered and re/inscribed. However, narratives can be shaped and shifted, re-oriented toward the more-than-human otherness that is so crucial to our survival in a time of climate crisis.

Evangelical Orientations: Buildings as Bodies

Orientation is not just a metaphor, it forms our lived experience. In ‘Metaphors We Live By,’ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write that: ‘the concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect...our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people...the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.’¹⁰² As Ahmed has pointed out, orientation occurs through habitual actions and routine alignments.¹⁰³ For Jue, who explores the possibilities opened up by an oceanic disorientation, language has developed in a world in which we are limited by a normative orientation toward a stable ground.¹⁰⁴ Reproducing these normative associations of the ground as a necessary stability, the metaphor of God as a rock surfaces repeatedly in the Bible. Jesus Christ, the ‘Corner Stone’ (Eph. 2:19-22, New International Version), materialises God as human, the central figure that secures the church as a building of bodies. His sacrificial body forms a ground on which the Christian worldview is built.

You’re no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You’re no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. 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. Eph. 19-22 (The Message)

Within the evangelical narrative, this metaphor of God as a stabilising foundation is extrapolated into preaching, teaching and song lyrics:

‘You are the solid ground;
Firm through the flood of uncertainty...
When the earth gives way;
When foundations shake;
My hope stands on Your promises...’¹⁰⁵

‘God has overcome
We will not be shaken
We will not be moved.’¹⁰⁶

Based on the Bible verse of the church as a building formed of bodies, an imaginary of belonging and enclosure arises, where the actual matter of the building – the bricks and mortar - is viewed as merely a tool, an unimportant but necessary form through which God might be encountered. The church is imagined instead as a

¹⁰² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁰³ Ahmed, *Orientations Matter*, 253.

¹⁰⁴ Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 6.

¹⁰⁵ LYA, “Prince of Peace,” 2019, Track #3, *In The Name Vol. 1*, Lakewood Records, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Darlene Zschech and Houghton, Israel, “In Jesus Name,” 2015, Track #7, *Covered: Alive in Asia*, RCA Inspiration and RGM NewBreed, 2015.

global crowd of Christian bodies. Here imaginaries and material realities, the body as a community and building, merge. Christian identity is repetitively constructed and imagined within and as part of the matter of the building. Identity is repeatedly performed, becoming a solid, unassailable edifice over time. Christian bodies become the bricks and mortar of an embodied site which channels divine presence. Whilst the visceral body is repressed, the voice is divinely appointed to speak out faith. Through their performative vocalisations, repeating and materialising the evangelical story-world into existence, the words, propelled out through the mouth into the air, create a climate in which belief circulates and is transmitted. The repetition of the story-world forms a cloud of words that solidify into a palimpsest. This solid ground of myth forms a foundation of certainty that enables a community to be structured and ordered. From this ground, an imaginary of solidity, of certainty, of common identity and purpose arises. Within this fabulation of homogenous unity however, the potential disruptions of otherness, of being otherwise always exist in moments of doubt, prevarication, of straying from orthodoxy. These disruptions are excluded from the imaginary, because unity of identity and purpose forms the crux, the crucial frame, the cornerstone of the cross on which a building-body is established. Profane, averring and doubting bodies become sanctified within the imaginary of a sacred enclosure based on bodily sacrifice. The sacrifice of flesh historically (firstly human and then animal) on the ceremonial establishment of a new building for a community is echoed here,¹⁰⁷ producing the enclosure and fixity of a walled in crowd. The repetitious construction and shoring up of individual identity as believer, through performative acts and vocalisation, maintains the strength and stability of the structure.

Peter L Berger's theory of the 'nomos' accounts for the way in which language, arranged into a meaningful order of experience, is experienced as stability.¹⁰⁸ For Berger, we order experience collectively, constructing reality through words that build worlds. This is a fundamentally orienting enterprise. Berger writes that: "The condition of the human organism in the world is...characterized by a built-in instability. Man does not have a given relationship to the world. He must ongoingly establish a relationship with it."¹⁰⁹ Religion occupies a distinctive place in social world-building in relation to the nomos,¹¹⁰ in which the individual is kept in place by an ongoing 'social conversation' that makes meaning.¹¹¹ Berger's conception of 'nomos' can be applied to both the broader movement of evangelicalism as a way of constructing a shared reality and the evangelical framing of God through orienting metaphors. To convert is literally to do an about-turn, to turn to face the other way (the Latin term *conversio* means 'turned about'), enacting a spatial and embodied metaphor towards the 'nomos,' or story-world.¹¹² Within the evangelical imaginary, to lose the meaning inherent in the shared, sustaining social conversation of religion threatens the stability of the individual with meaninglessness. That there might be the potential for other meanings is occluded within evangelicalism. Berger writes:

¹⁰⁷ Historically, European and Asian religious ritual entailed a sacrifice of blood to ensure a building's stability. Prior to animal sacrifice, where the animals blood flowed onto the foundation altar and the beast was buried underneath the stone, the practice of measuring a man's shadow supplanted the immediate violence of literally immuring a person within the walls or beneath the foundation stone to ward against disaster and loss. A builder or shadow trader (traders who would provide architects with the shadows necessary for strengthening the building), would entice a man towards the foundation stone until his shadow fell upon it, measure the shadow and bury the measure. See: James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106-107.

¹⁰⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 5-6.

¹¹⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 3.

¹¹¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 22.

¹¹² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 5-6.

It is for this reason that radical separation from the social world, or anomy, constitutes such a powerful threat to the individual. It is not only that the individual loses emotionally satisfying ties in such cases. He loses his orientation in experience. In extreme cases he loses his sense of reality and identity. He becomes anomic in the sense of becoming world-less...The world begins to shake in the very instant that its sustaining conversation begins to falter.¹¹³

Here, Berger replicates the evangelical imaginary of its story-world as exclusively meaningful, whilst outside exists the chaos of meaningless, an existential threat to be overcome by staying within the safety of the shared social conversation. However, loss of one social conversation does not mean the loss of all others and the loss of meaning does not always lead to terror, but might also produce the ineffability of embodied mystical experience.

In the evangelical orientation, the believer is oriented within the 'safety' of the 'nomos' in a number of ways within the religious habitus.¹¹⁴ The believer is aligned in relation to the authority of a rock like God communicated via the Bible, which is mediated through the church, the head of which is the typically male preacher. Religious stability is conveyed through a redemption story that encompasses all time and space: the narrative arc of creation, fall, resurrection and recreation that bends towards ultimate victory. The community is also a stabilising place of belonging.

Lakewood's adherence to an imaginary of Biblical literalism can be accessed on Lakewood's website, which states: 'We believe the entire Bible is inspired by God and without error. The Bible is the authority on which we base our faith, conduct and doctrine.'¹¹⁵ This is the 'world speaking itself as a story.'¹¹⁶ 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...'). To consign the evangelical narrative to the level of a 'story' (one story among others) is an anathema, it is to deny its' deepest foundations. Within the evangelical imaginary the content of the redemption narrative is considered paramount, the telling merely a necessity for allowing the world to speak itself as it truly is. Through repetition, the story is sacralised and concretised. It is no longer mutable and contingent, for the believer it becomes ossified into an immovable foundation, and the believer is bound to it, producing, at in evangelicalisms more extreme forms, a deeply embodied effect of being grounded, of being set in stone.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 21-22.

¹¹⁴ How religious narrative is embedded and perpetuated within the body through repeated vocalization, actions and rituals might be considered in relation to the sociological concept of 'body pedagogics.' Mellor and Shilling propose, in 'The Religious Habitus' a theoretical bridge between the opposing accounts of classical sociologists Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, concerning the relationship between the individual subject and the religious group. These accounts concern the impact of embodied feeling and sensation on conscience and consciousness, contributing to individuals' creation of and participation in social groupings and religious collectivities, and how in turn these groupings and collectives could be shaped and limited by the bodies of those individuals. Mellor and Shilling write: 'The habitus refers to a socially structured bodily disposition that promotes particular orientations to the world. As a concept, it enables us to view the body-society relationship from the starting point of either the collectivity (the approach usually ascribed to Durkheim) or the embodied individual (the methodological position with which Weber is ordinarily associated).' (2010: 202) The habitus brings together both body and social structure in a dynamic interaction in order to adequately theorise religious belief in contemporary society. Mellor and Shilling categorise the religious habitus into five categories. The final category of 'body pedagogics' is: 'how, and to what degree, the orientations, dispositions, values, and techniques validated by cultural forms, including those of religion, are actually embodied in individuals.' (2010: 215)

¹¹⁵ 'About Us,' Lakewood Church, accessed 6th June 2022, <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about>.

¹¹⁶ White, "The Value of Narrativity," 7.

¹¹⁷ Those excluded from evangelicalism's norms may experience this as trauma. See Valerie Tarico, 'Religious Trauma Syndrome: How Some Organised Religion Leads to Mental Health Problems,' *TruthOut*, accessed 6th June 2022, [https://truthout.org/articles/religious-trauma-syndrome-how-some-organized-religion-leads-to-mental-health-problems/#:~:text=Winell%3A%20Religious%20trauma%20syndrome%20\(RTS,of%20leaving%20a%20religious%20group](https://truthout.org/articles/religious-trauma-syndrome-how-some-organized-religion-leads-to-mental-health-problems/#:~:text=Winell%3A%20Religious%20trauma%20syndrome%20(RTS,of%20leaving%20a%20religious%20group).

Religious language has a tendency to both underwrite the individual in relation to providing a solid foundation for experience, but it also overwrites the individual, by imposing an authorizing, dominant, monopolizing framework. The believer's identity is subsumed within the 'closed system'¹¹⁸ of this totality: by the Biblical story and its particular narration within the church.

The story is also inflected by the particularities of the narrator, narrative texts and narratee. It combines with its materialisation in the church, whose histories, values and current contexts produce a ground upon which a collective identity is constructed. Therefore the believer, despite producing an individual interpretation and response, is however oriented towards an authorised text, narrated by the particularities of the church.

Chris Hedges and others have argued that evangelical Biblical literalism, whilst proclaimed by evangelicals, isn't evenly applied, but instead is infiltrated by other ideologies. Evangelicalism arose out of the early revivals of the eighteenth century. These populist religious movements combined with American characteristics, such as individualism and the ability to create one's own destiny to form into a specifically American evangelicalism that is largely socially and politically conservative.¹¹⁹ Historian James Davison Hunter asserts that:

The evangelical heritage has long identified itself with the hopes and promises of America. Evangelicals view themselves as having helped to create and sustain all that is good in America: its traditions of moral virtue; its ethic of work, commitment, and achievement; and its political and economic institutions.¹²⁰

Within American evangelicalism there is a tendency to 'cherry pick,' avoiding the detail of Judaic law, but choosing instead to respond to passages about homosexuality (for example) to suit a wider narrative of the need for social and political conservatism and moral decay in America. In the evangelical megachurch, the Christian narrative of creation, fall, resurrection and recreation has mingled thoroughly with the secular context. As I lay out in the next two chapters, the story is always inflected by its the teller, the texts and the web of relations in which the telling takes place.¹²¹

Lakewood's Orientations

At Lakewood, the believer is aligned toward a clear set of beliefs repeated at the start of every service. Joel Osteen's father John founded the church within the evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Before every message, John would hold his Bible aloft and inviting the congregation to join in, make this collective declaration:

¹¹⁸ Claude Levi-Straus, *Myth and Meaning* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 34.

¹¹⁹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 2.

¹²⁰ James Davison Hunter, "The Shaping of American Foreign Policy" in *Evangelicals and Foreign Policy*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1989), 72.

¹²¹ See Christopher G. Ellison and Darren E. Sheerkat, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 'Obedience and Autonomy: Religion and Parental Values Reconsidered', Dec., 1993, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Dec., 1993), pp. 313-329: 'Specifically, self-proclaimed literalists tend to argue that the Bible is unitary and inerrant - containing no error (and thus no contradiction), and leading to no error (Achtemeier 1980). Indeed, for literalists the "soundness" of a particular scriptural interpretation often depends upon the degree to which the interpreter both accepts and preserves these core claims (Lindsell 1976; Boone 1989). As many observers recognize, "literal" readings of scripture are social products, generated and disseminated within communities of conservative evangelical theologians, pastors, and influential laity, with recourse to a select number of extrabiblical commentaries and reference materials (see Boone 1989).' p. 315.



Fig. 5. Pastors John and Dodie Osteen, Lakewood Church, by Edd Hayes. (2009, bronze, 10 x 5 ft.). (Image credit: Kate Pickering).

This is my Bible, I am who it says I am. I can do what it says I can do. Today, I will be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess: my mind is alert, my heart is receptive. I'll never be the same. I'm about to receive the incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of the Word of God. I'll never be the same. Never, never, never. I'll never be the same. In Jesus' Name. Amen!¹²²

The declaration embeds a set of orienting beliefs through repetitive vocalisation: belief that the word (of the Bible) constitutes and produces the believer, that the word is outside of time and is powerfully transformative and that the individual must align to it in thought and feeling. Avoiding the fact that it is altered by context, the word of God is solidly 'incorruptible' and 'indestructible,' but it is also a seed that contains the promise of growth and life. The repetition of the word 'never' five times enacts a dramatic refusal of the old, non-aligned, disbelieving self and embeds the new identity through performative vocalisation. This has now been replaced by Joel's version of a collective declaration. Devoid of any overt reference to the Bible, he foregrounds the therapeutic and teleological story of Lakewood, stating:

I am blessed, prosperous, redeemed, forgiven, talented, creative, confident, secure, disciplined, focused, prepared, qualified, motivated, valuable, free, determined, equipped, empowered, anointed, accepted and

¹²² John Osteen quoted in Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile*, 217-218.

approved. Not average, not mediocre, I am a child of the Most High God. I will become who I was created to be, in Jesus' name. Amen.¹²³

As believers in the congregation mirror Joel, holding up their Bibles and collectively declaring the faith filled words, a transformative entrainment takes place as they align. For Stevenson, this declaration: 'collapses Osteen's and God's words into a single entity.'¹²⁴ The preacher becomes God's mouthpiece, taking up his role as mediator of divine authority.

In Lakewood's 'New Beginnings' booklet for new converts, it states: 'To be saved...is turning from our old ways and turning to Jesus...we receive a new identity in Christ.'¹²⁵ Echoing this transition to a new identity, Lakewood's website states: 'We believe every believer should be in a growing relationship with Jesus by obeying God's word, yielding to the Holy Spirit and by being conformed to the image of Christ.'¹²⁶ Obeying, yielding and conforming are necessary in order to become part of the body. Whilst this submission is a battle, God can help, working inside the believer to enable them to be correctly ordered: 'Learning to live in our new identity is a process. Even though we experience new life with Christ, we can still get tripped up by old habits and mindsets at times. However, we can be confident that regardless of our past, our mistakes, or even how we feel now, God is at work inside of us creating new life.'¹²⁷ Believers are encouraged to test their unholy or unaligned thoughts against the correcting authorisation of scripture as mediated through the preacher and his teaching materials. 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,' creating a perception of being stabilised. 'Compass,' 'navigator' and 'life' groups, alongside 'orientation' meetings foreground this through metaphor.

The congregant faces a compelling image during the worship service – the preacher, his body and voice instrumentalised toward the communication of a heartfelt message, superimposed onto a slowly rotating golden globe. The stage design of the Sanctuary (Lakewood's main worship space) has morphed through several sites but all iterations reinforce a world-building narrative. Hypersaturated mimicry of the natural world (expanded upon in the next chapter) suggest an elemental, world revealing and founding performance is being played out on stage, through images of rock, water and sky. The ritualistic telling and re-telling of this story of stories becomes a world (re)making certainty for the believer. 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 globe is 11.5-foot wide and hollow, formed of latitudinal and longitudinal lines upon which glinting continents are arrayed. It images a map and an orientation device. Despite its rotation, it depicts a stable ground from which the preacher re-tells the Lakewood redemption narrative, speaking the world as an enduring and unassailable truth. As the preacher re-tells this narrative it

¹²³ Lakewood Church, "I am blessed, Prosperous, Redeemed, Forgiven." Facebook, 4th April 2021, https://fb.watch/aM_LO_G4S/.

¹²⁴ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 214.

¹²⁵ Lakewood Church, *New Beginnings*, 7. Booklet published by Lakewood Church, free to download from (accessed 6th June 2022): <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/newbeginnings>

¹²⁶ Lakewood, *New Beginnings*, 28.

¹²⁷ Lakewood, *New Beginnings*, 8.

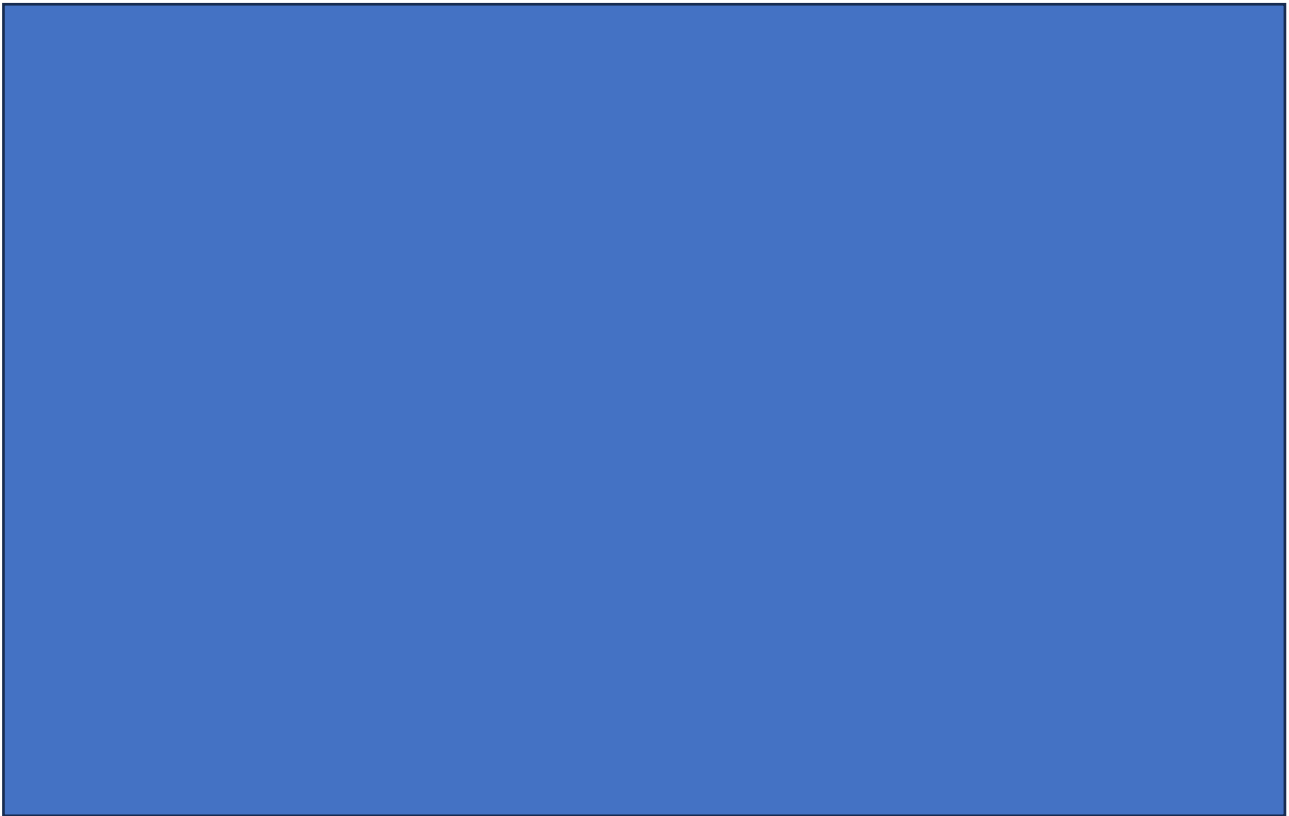


Fig. 6. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood's golden globe, available at: <https://rbdg.com/project/lakewood-church/>)

materialises as a foundational stratum. He channels, through his position as a speaker of the world, through performative vocalisation and gesture, a seemingly global message. The preacher, perceived as a oneness with the global image, becomes the world's mouthpiece. Within the body of the individual who believes, this world-making narrative materialises as a new reality.

In charismatic, pastor-focussed churches like Lakewood, the preaching (also known as the message) during the service is key for conveying the church's unique vision and brand. Joel Osteen is a bestselling author, celebrity and multi-millionaire whose face is endlessly repeated on screens, on the internet and through his televangelism programme. The alignment of viewers eyes (4 million watching live through digital platforms in 2020, 7 million watching on TV in 2019),¹²⁸ and in person congregants (several thousand or more), onto his face propels him to a lofty position of influence and respect. Despite the vantage point of the congregant in the Sanctuary typically being slightly raised around the stage, congregants look up to Joel's face in high definition detail on screen. The celebrity pastor however, highlights his 'ordinariness,' and appears familiar, almost shy at times. Osteen has been leading the church since 1999, and his story of hope has remained the same for twenty three years, his books repeating the same messages from his sermons. Both Helje Kringlebotn Sodal and Stevenson found striking consistency over time.¹²⁹ Similarly, I have noted the exact same service structure, message content, even down to

¹²⁸ Statistics taken from Lakewood Church Overflow Report 2020, no longer available online.

¹²⁹ Helje Kringlebotn Sodal, "'Victor, Not Victim': Joel Osteen's Rhetoric of Hope", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25, no. 1 (January 2010): 37–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900903416804>, 47; Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 217.



Fig. 7. Joel Osteen preaching at Lakewood Church on July 17, 2016. Robert M. Worsham, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>.

the same exact wording of the altar call and prayers at the end of the service, over a ten year period. Osteen continues to repeat his winning formula. Stevenson considers that Osteen's 'script'¹³⁰ provides familiarity and reassurance, but is also 'potent,' through a 'performative iteration.'¹³¹ The careful scripting of his messages follows into a polished performative delivery. Osteen learns his words by heart by listening to himself on tape, practices his movements and gestures, and accurately times his sermons to fit with TV broadcast.¹³²

As Osteen delivers his message, the globe symbolises that these words will constitute something of global significance. He speaks the world into being. Myth, or muthos for the ancient Greeks, was a true story, a story that revealed the origin of the world and humankind. 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.¹³³ Myth is the telling of the world through linguistic construction. Myth is the formation of a story of stories, and thus could be applied to the Christian redemption narrative which starts at the beginning of the world and ends with a new heaven and earth.

¹³⁰ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 217.

¹³¹ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 217.

¹³² See Sodal, "Victor, Not Victim," 42; and Nicola Menzie, 'Joel Osteen Talks Biggest Preaching Mistake, 'Owning the Room',' The Christian Post, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/joel-osteen-talks-biggest-preaching-mistake-owning-the-room-94667/>.

¹³³ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 52-55.

Nancy points to this structuring of world or cosmos (the universe as a coherent whole) through word (logos): ‘myth has been the name *for logos structuring itself*, or, and this comes down to the same thing, the name for the *cosmos structuring itself in logos*.’¹³⁴ Mythic speech not only serves to order the world, but for Nancy is: ‘a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it,’¹³⁵ it reveals and finds: ‘the intimate being of a community.’¹³⁶ The narration of myth forms a stable, enduring ground, anchoring the believer within the shifting seas of experience. As the preacher at Lakewood speaks out the founding, stabilising narrative, bodies feel themselves bound by the words into an immersive story-world. Evangelical megachurch world-building responds to the embodied desire for a nomos. This world-building is an expansive and durational form of performing a fiction and creating an ongoing social conversation, forming here a totalising and universalising world. However, problems arise when the world-building enterprise overwrites or occludes all other narratives that do not fit within its norms.

At Lakewood, the Christian redemption story is inflected with its context. It is viewed through the lens of the pre-eminence of family (an accretion of the Osteen family history through repeated narration) and an exceptional patrilineal leadership, and through Texan Anglo-American identity; specifically Twentieth Century colonial and capitalist ‘progress’ and ‘success.’ Mara Einstein highlights the faith brand of Joel Osteen, and by extension Lakewood church, is based on a brand mythology of growth, prosperity, family values and the overcoming of trouble by faith in a miraculous God.¹³⁷ I argue that Lakewood’s redemption story is saturated with its situatedness: the story becomes both therapeutic and teleological.

Lakewood’s Therapeutic Narrative

In the sizeable shop situated on the first floor of Lakewood outside the Sanctuary, a range of books, music, clothing, homeware and toys are for sale. Amongst the rows of bookshelves it is possible to purchase Joel and Victoria Osteen’s bestselling books. Victoria (Joel’s wife) has written: *Love Your Life: Living Happy, Healthy, and Whole* and *Exceptional You*,¹³⁸ whilst Joel, following his father’s prolific output, has written more than twenty, including: *Your Best Life Now*, *Become a Better You*, *The Power of I Am* and *Empty Out the Negative*.¹³⁹ Of all the objects in the shop, one that seems to summarise the therapeutic narrative succinctly is a striped canvas tote bag emblazoned with the words: ‘ANCHORED TO HOPE.’ This phrase orients the believer with a comforting promise of wellness and healing in the now and future fulfilment. The redemption narrative is extrapolated into a therapeutic message of individual positive thinking, aligning with God’s promise of fulfilment and comfort and the belief that God’s blessing is on its way whatever the current circumstances. But this reassuring and simplistic

¹³⁴ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 49.

¹³⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 49.

¹³⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 48.

¹³⁷ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, Religion, Media and Culture Series (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 122-126.

¹³⁸ Victoria Osteen, *Love Your Life: Living Happy, Healthy, and Whole*, (New York: Free Press, 2008); Victoria Osteen *Exceptional You* (New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2019).

¹³⁹ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, (New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2004); Joel Osteen *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day*, (New York: Free Press, 2007); Joel Osteen, *The Power of I Am: Two Words That Will Change Your Life Today* (New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2016); Joel Osteen *Empty Out the Negative: Make Room for More Joy, Greater Confidence, and New Levels of Influence*, (New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2020)

message belies complex realities. For a White, wealthy, heteronormative man with influence and success, speaking a message of hope trips easily off the tongue.



Fig. 8. Lakewood Church Bookstore, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

Katja Rakow draw parallels with the emergence of a therapeutic culture in America and the shift in church culture toward a seeker oriented, pastoral, non-liturgical or ‘feel good’ model.¹⁴⁰ As Thumma and Travis have demonstrated, the majority of US megachurches are tailored toward the unchurched. They strive to create a low level of tension with the ‘outside’ secular culture, to make the transition into church life as easy as possible, appearing homogenous with other contemporary sites and spaces and contributing to a ‘cultural isomorphism.’ The ‘regime of the self,’¹⁴¹ 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, is mirrored in a constant focus at Lakewood on individual progress, fulfilment, and achievement. Rakow reveals that: ‘the therapeutic discourse strongly influences notions of self and personhood in contemporary America.’¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Katja Rakow, ‘Therapeutic Culture and Religion in America’; and Katja Rakow, ‘Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs.’ Analysing Osteen’s ‘message of hope’ as a product, Rakow demonstrates how branding, as a ‘commercial process of storytelling’ achieves emotional attachment to a product, making it memorable and distinct. It also creates ‘meaning and a sense of community.’ Rakow, *Religious Branding*, 218.

¹⁴¹ Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁴² Rakow, *Religious Branding*, 229.

As Osteen takes the stage for his message ‘Seeing Beyond the Logical’ at Lakewood’s Sunday morning service, the band descend into the orchestra pit, replaced by the globe which rises and slowly spins behind him.¹⁴³ The Sanctuary is brightly lit and the backdrop screen behind him is sky-blue. As always, he is smartly dressed in a suit, his diminutive stature offset by an engaging Texan warmth. He is here to preach to the thousands gathered in the Sanctuary, to the tens of thousands watching it via live stream, and the millions who will later watch or listen on Facebook, on Instagram, on local and national radio stations and Sirius XM. His voice is familiar but carries a gentle authority.

As is his custom, he begins by telling a joke to put the congregation at ease. On this occasion, it is a humorous but revealing story about the Biblical rule of men being the head of the household and where the real power lies. God asks the men queuing up at the gates of heaven to form into two lines, divided into those who are head of the house and those who ‘allow’ women be head of the house. The first line only has one man in it, whilst the cuckolds form a line 100 miles long. ‘Men!’ says God, ‘I’m disappointed! Why only is there only one man in this first line?’ The man on his own replies: ‘My wife told me to stand here!’ Osteen, through humour, appears to perform a contemporary reversal of Biblical mores. This is an attempt to appeal to both men, who may laugh, perhaps uncomfortably, at their usurpation from the expectation that they are head of the household, and women, who recognise that whilst the Bible has a gender-based hierarchy, reality is different. However, the joke also reveals and embeds the social conservatism at the heart of what appears on the surface to be a contemporary institution, with the implicit assumption being that men are still at the head of the hierarchy, and that this hierarchy is both ordained by and continues to be judged by God. This anti-feminism is deeply problematic at a time when women struggle for control over their own bodies in the advent of the supreme court reversal of *Roe vs. Wade* and the dismantling of abortion rights. The belief, widespread in traditionalist evangelicalism, that women’s labour should mainly focus on the domestic realm, perpetuates a wider lack of value and status attributed to women who continue to disproportionately carry the burden of domestic and emotional labour within the home without recognition or pay.¹⁴⁴

The joke is followed by Osteen’s message, filled with both the upward sweep of positivity and hope for which he is known, but also expands upon the Christian belief that faith is of a higher order than human knowledge, as set out in the Bible verse: ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.’ (Prov. 3: 5-6, NIV). In repeated exhortations to believers not to be limited by material circumstances of addiction, poverty, poor health, lack of career progression, Osteen states: ‘When there is no solution in the natural...that’s a test. Are you going to get discouraged and give up on your dreams or are you going to walk by faith and not by sight?’ This encouragement reflects the sort of positive thinking inherent in the idea of manifestation within the wider wellness industry – the

¹⁴³ Rakow, ‘The Light of the World’, 96: ‘A typical worship service at Lakewood Church consists of several parts. The first song starts off the church service, followed by a brief welcome message of the pastor couple Victoria and Joel Osteen. The praise music phase is followed by the worship music phase, which blends into a prayer session. A musical interlude signals the next part of the service: a brief message delivered by Victoria Osteen and the invitation to give. After the tithing, Joel Osteen enters the stage and delivers his message, which usually ends with an altar call and a prayer. A last song concludes the worship service.’

¹⁴⁴ Amanda Barroso, ‘For American couples, gender gaps in sharing household responsibilities persist amid pandemic,’ Pew Research Center, accessed 4th August 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/25/for-american-couples-gender-gaps-in-sharing-household-responsibilities-persist-amid-pandemic/>

idea that through focussed thought and visualisation you can improve yourself and your desires will materialise.¹⁴⁵

Osteen frames logical thinking as the flipside of faith, as ‘dangerous’ and ‘a dangerous trap’ in its potential for deceiving believers that God is ultimately in control. He draws on the Biblical creation story in Genesis to highlight that God Himself isn’t ordered by logic. On the first day, God said ‘Let there be light!’, but, Osteen points out, the sun wasn’t created until the fourth day, a contradiction shown as evidence of a supernatural God who is able to do the impossible. Rather than interpreting the Bible as fallible, this instead becomes evidence of God’s power, in a circular, totalising logic where everything in the Bible is explicable. Weaving into the message a series of personal stories and anecdotes that include miraculous healing and provision, for example still thriving Dodie Osteen’s terminal diagnosis in 1981, Osteen states: ‘God is not limited by the laws of medicine, the laws of economics, the laws of nature, the laws of science...He’s not moved by the natural, He’s supernatural!’

Foregrounding the affective and embodied forms of meaning making and a subtle anti-intellectualism at work in Lakewood, he concludes his message by saying: ‘Sometimes you have to turn your mind off...faith is not of the mind, faith is of the heart. Yes we should use common sense, make good decisions, but don’t let your logic talk you out of what God put in your heart.’ Here Osteen uncovers the privileging of feeling and faith over reason inherent within Lakewood and evangelicalism historically. As Christine Miller and Nathan Carlin have noted: ‘people do not go to Lakewood to learn about the Bible intellectually or academically. They go, rather, to be restored—emotionally and spiritually. They go to be transformed. They go to find their best self.’¹⁴⁶ In order to maintain his easy-going appeal, aspects of traditional conservative teaching on dogma and ethics are downplayed.¹⁴⁷ Osteen doesn’t dispute traditional teaching, but maintains his simple message. In the face of criticism that he is preaching a watered down gospel-lite, he has repeatedly stated that different leaders are called to different paths.¹⁴⁸ Osteen explains: ‘I’m called to plant a seed of hope in people’s hearts. I’m not called to explain every minute facet of Scripture or to expound on deep theological doctrines or disputes that don’t touch where real people live. My gifting is to encourage, to challenge, and to inspire.’¹⁴⁹ Dodie Osteen has emphasised: ‘we don’t preach the gospel sad, we preach it glad.’¹⁵⁰

Additionally, the belief in the miraculous is a common thread within Charismatic and Pentecostal evangelical churches, and stories of miracles and fortuitous events, including physical healing, abound. This teaching, however, has the potential to create passivity, a waiting on God as a rescuer rather than actively addressing problems. More problematically, but still a common idea within evangelicalism, is the belief that: ‘Sometimes he lets the odds be against you on purpose so that when he turns it around, it will be a bigger miracle.’ This idea of God perpetuating suffering in order to promote His own glory is troubling, and appears to work against the

¹⁴⁵ Stuart McGurk, ‘Making dreams come true: inside the new age world of manifesting,’ *The Guardian*, accessed 9th July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/mar/20/making-dreams-come-true-inside-the-new-age-world-of-manifesting>.

¹⁴⁶ Christine Miller and Carlin, Nathan, ‘Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject: Meeting the Needs of the Group Self and Its Individual Members in and from the Largest Church in America’, *Pastoral Psychology*, 59:27–51, (April 2009), 39.

¹⁴⁷ Sodal, “‘Victor, Not Victim,’” 39.

¹⁴⁸ Larry King, Interview with Joel and Victoria Osteen, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/lkl/date/2007-10-16/segment/01>: “You know what? There are different callings. I can’t fault anybody”.

¹⁴⁹ Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 236.

¹⁵⁰ ‘America’s largest church opens in former arena’, *USA Today*, accessed 7th June 2022, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-14-largest-church_x.htm.

Biblical framing of a God of love who cares deeply for His creation. It may also be little comfort to those who are in dire circumstances which won't result in a victorious reversal.

Sodal, describing Osteen's brand as a 'rhetoric of hope,'¹⁵¹ outlines the range of redemption stories he employs, as arguments for progress, hope, and relationship building: divorced people remarry, abused people recover, obese people lose weight, addicted people overcome their addictions, fraying marriages are mended, those in financial predicaments make money, workers become employers, and ill people are healed or learn to live a good life, despite their illness.¹⁵² The importance of this hopeful message is underlined by Osteen separating the hopeful from those with the wrong attitude, unaligned with God. 'Unholy' is translated within the therapeutic context into 'average,' 'mediocre,' 'nay-sayer,' or 'poverty mentality.'¹⁵³ Osteen avoids 'sin' and instead focusses on 'bad choices,' 'wrong attitude,' 'failures,' and 'mistakes.'¹⁵⁴ Cataloguing numerous references to the body including appearance, shape, size, weight, how people speak and hold themselves, in addition to material acquisition such as cars, homes, clothing and interior décor, Luke Winslow writes that: 'By repeatedly and consistently referencing aesthetic dimensions like physical attractiveness, body shape, and hygiene habits, Osteen discursively constructs an aesthetic separation between what he calls God's *favoured* from the *unfavoured*.'¹⁵⁵ Personal growth and success becomes a sign of being rightly aligned with God's favour. This doesn't diminish the potential for supernatural intervention, but at Lakewood: 'God prefers to intervene when the individual shows a positive attitude towards life.'¹⁵⁶

His sermons string together anecdotes from his own life with exhortations to positivity, hope and faith. A scroll through Joel Osteen's Instagram account ('Inspiring people to reach their dreams and live their best life'; 4.8 million followers), a combination of video extracts of him preaching and appealingly imaged quotes, quickly reveals the relentless positivity and upbeat orientation of his narrative. A series of aphorisms appear profoundly true, shot through with simple wisdom. In his recent 'Hope' stories, against backdrops of pink skies, starry cosmos swirls, white clouds against the blue, Osteen quotes abound: 'It's your time to shine. You have everything you need to fulfil your destiny', 'Stand Strong: The Lord your God is with you', 'You're the one to set a new standard, to be the difference maker.'¹⁵⁷ In his 'Inspiration' stories, a series of images of dramatic waterfalls, craggy coastlines, redwood forests and mountain ranges are overlaid with the texts that encourage the believer to replace negative thinking with positive: 'Fear can't stay where faith is,' 'Discouragement can't stay

¹⁵¹ Sodal, "Victor, Not Victim," 39.

¹⁵² Sodal, "Victor, Not Victim," 43.

¹⁵³ Sodal, "Victor, Not Victim," 45, original link no longer available; see instead: 'Osteen rejects 'poverty' faith mindset,' CNN, accessed 10th June 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2012/04/24/sot-osteen-god-and-wealth.cnn#:~:text=Televangelist%20Joel%20Osteen%20says%20he,to%20be%20a%20good%20Christian.>

¹⁵⁴ Sodal, "Victor, Not Victim," 46.

¹⁵⁵ Winslow, 'The Imaged Other,' 254.

¹⁵⁶ Sodal, "Victor, Not Victim," 40-41.

¹⁵⁷ Joel Osteen, 'Hope,' Instagram Stories, accessed 7th June 2022,

https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3ODg0OTkyOTY4NDM0Nzk2?story_media_id=2631497314279345327&igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=.

where hope is,' 'Stress can't stay where peace is,' 'Mediocrity can't stay where greatness is,' 'It may not be easy but your destiny is calling,' 'Don't let good enough be good enough.'¹⁵⁸

Miller and Carlin posit Joel Osteen as a 'cultural selfobject' (drawing on Sudhir Kakar's analysis of Heinz Kohut's Self psychology), a form of guru who provides a calming structure and sense of continuity.¹⁵⁹ They consider that:

'Osteen fulfils all of the duties of the ideal guru. He never criticizes his flock but helps the hurting break self-destructive patterns of thinking and behaviour through practical advice and praise. By means of mirroring transferences and idealizing transferences, Osteen's flock is uplifted by his presence as their sense of self-worth is gradually restored. It is the power of this therapeutic encounter between Osteen and his congregation that holds the key to his appeal.'¹⁶⁰

However, the overwhelming repetitiousness of these simple platitudes through so many platforms begins to empty the words of their meaning, and the apparent depth falters when applied to any complex situation. The ideas and exhortations appear on the surface as common sense but are vapid in their lack of context. In a continuation of his father's adherence to the word of faith movement, Osteen asks the congregation in one sermon entitled 'Change your name:' 'In your mind, is your name born to lose or born to win? Is your name poor, broke, defeated or is your name blessed, prosperous, more than enough? Have you let life name your addicted, struggling, limited, or do you go by what God names you? Free, whole, victorious, overcomer?'¹⁶¹ Osteen, the 'smiling preacher,' overlooks the possibility that material circumstances might be produced by more than individual determination and willpower. Each body in the crowd is a product of multiple, intersecting forces and influences, not least the structural inequalities caused by free market capitalism, and willpower or positive thought alone cannot shift the global paradigm.

Furthermore, a repeated idea in his messages focusses on leaving small minded people behind, sloughing off 'petty' people who aren't moving you forward. In a recent Instagram video post, these 'naysayers' or 'dream-stealers,' are people who don't come into agreement with your dream. He encourages the believer to leave them behind with a metaphor of toxicity: 'you don't need that poison in your atmosphere.'¹⁶² Such a metaphor underlines the imaginary of a purity of atmosphere within the community. Excluding alternative viewpoints in order to maintain alignment with Osteen's therapeutic and teleological orientation seems to suggest a cult-like

¹⁵⁸ Joel Osteen, 'Inspiration,' Instagram Stories, accessed 7th June 2022, https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3OTI5NjE4NjA2MTQ3MDI3?story_media_id=1818956386747585284&igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=.

Within Christian tradition there are a wide range of theological positions in relation to the doctrine of Christian perfectionism – the goal of achieving sanctification or union with the divine in personal holiness and spiritual maturity. Sanctification begins at the point of salvation – confession of faith in Jesus Christ – and continues throughout life to reach fulfilment in Heaven. Some Christian traditions believe this sanctification is possible, however, in this life. Holiness Pentecostals, for example, believe that sanctification is the second work in the three works of grace – salvation, sanctification, and then the Baptism of the Holy Spirit marked by the gift of speaking in tongues.

¹⁵⁹ Miller and Carlin, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,' 37.

¹⁶⁰ Miller and Carlin, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,' 39.

¹⁶¹ Joel Osteen, 'Change Your Name,' November 17th 2019, YouTube, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xEwzWjvJGA>.

¹⁶² Lakewood Church, 'You have greatness in you!,' Instagram video post, 24th May 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cd9LaFSDQud/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

adherence to one way of thinking as unassailable. It cements binaries of outside and in, favoured and unfavoured, believer and non-believer.

In 'Bright-sided: How the Relentless Focus on Positive Thinking has Undermined America,' Barbara Ehrenreich critiques the popularity of megachurch 'pastorpreneurs' who focus on positive thinking, pastors who exclude an emphasis on sin and morality.¹⁶³ Ehrenreich outlines how positive thinking, which she describes as a type of practiced optimism rather than hope, has become entrenched as a dominant attitude within American culture to its detriment. Evident across medicine, psychology, religion and particularly within the business community where it has taken on a 'symbiotic' relationship with capitalism,¹⁶⁴ positivity is perceived as part of American's national character. Ehrenreich writes that: 'Perpetual growth, whether of a particular company or an entire economy, is of course, an absurdity, but positive thinking makes it seem possible, if not ordained.'¹⁶⁵ It impacts on nationalistic pride, is framed as a 'patriotism' in which America is seen as 'more dynamic, democratic, and prosperous than any other nation as well as technologically superior.'¹⁶⁶

Ehrenreich demonstrates that the prevalent belief in America that things are good and only getting better creates an incapacity to imagine the worst. Dismissing disturbing indicators of trouble has led to numerous national disasters (the World Trade Centre attacks, the failures of the Iraqi war, hurricane Katrina and the financial crisis of 2007) that could have been ameliorated by better preparedness and planning. Through its therapeutic narrative Lakewood provides the congregant with mechanisms to deal with the demands of contemporary neoliberal existence. However, it does not address the wider structures that require the soothing narration of a therapeutic message, that create unhappiness, poverty and stress. The emphasis on individual positivity at Lakewood shifts attention away from broader barriers to wellbeing, wealth and career success. Those who are yet to have their dreams fulfilled are told not to whine but to 'think positive.' In *Your Best Life Now*, rather than highlighting precarious labour conditions and wealth inequality, Osteen rebukes employees who allow dissatisfaction with their wages to impact on their enthusiasm for the work: 'You won't be blessed with that kind of attitude. God wants you to give it everything you've got. Be enthusiastic. Set an example.'¹⁶⁷ Osteen's messages and books, whilst making reference to God, all place responsibility on the individual to effect change.¹⁶⁸ Rakow writes that this emphasis: 'dovetail(s) with a neoliberal discourse that naturalises the idea of individual autonomy while simultaneously concealing the supra-individual forces of the material and social world.'¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*, 1. ed, A Metropolitan Book (New York: Picador, 2010), 123-124.

¹⁶⁴ Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*, 8.

¹⁶⁶ Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*, 6.

¹⁶⁷ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 298.

¹⁶⁸ Rakow, *Religious Branding*, 229.

¹⁶⁹ Rakow, *Religious Branding*, 229.

Positive thinking and self-help individualism appears to ease the demands made on our mental and physical health by longer working hours, precarity and increased emphasis on productivity, but do nothing to address ableist, racial, class or gender-based inequalities.¹⁷⁰ Sophie McBain writes:

The modern cult of wellness promotes pseudo-science, entrenches health inequalities and co-opts political terms such as “self-love” and “empowerment” into something you can buy. It encodes a rampant individualism: the idea that you alone are responsible for your well-being. Wellness gurus treat the self as the source of endless improvement while acting as though a person’s socio-economic environment is as immutable as the laws of physics, hardly worth mentioning, unless you wish to add a line about your privilege in a gratitude journal.¹⁷¹

During one of my visits to the worship services, after making statements about focussing on ‘moving forward’ and ‘leaving different to when you came in,’ Osteen followed his declaration of faith by saying ‘God handpicked each one of you. You’re not just another of the seven billion on this planet.’¹⁷² Congregants are framed as specially anointed, exceptional, destined to succeed.

Historian Christopher Lasch, in his still relevant 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism*, wrote: ‘the contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. Today people hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security.’¹⁷³ At Lakewood, the culture appeals to both the need for a therapeutic message and the need for religion. Whether dealing with the pressures of work or developing the self, the megachurch sees no conflict in its replication of wider therapeutic discourse and its entanglement in consumer capitalism. It actively and knowingly assists it: ‘offer(ing) a way to comply with the ubiquitous imperative to self-fulfilment.’¹⁷⁴ The therapeutic megachurch is the product of a religion steeped thoroughly and uncritically in its context.

Lakewood’s Teleological Narrative: A Sky-bound Orientation

Lakewood’s orienting story, a rock-like certainty that the believer will overcome, is not devoid of movement. The believer is on a heavenward trajectory. Within the evangelical narrative, salvation to the ends of the earth, when every person has had the chance to repent, prompts the second coming of Christ and the creation of a new heaven and earth. At Lakewood, this is shaped into a linear teleology of redemptive victory in this life, and rescue into the next.¹⁷⁵ The expansion and increasing influence and wealth of the church as a thread within that

¹⁷⁰ See Ehrenreich, *BrightSided*; Ronald E. Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Repeater, 2019); Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, Sociological Research Online, ‘The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism’ April 30, 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418769673>; et al.

¹⁷¹ Sophie McBain, ‘The dark side of the wellness industry,’ *The New Statesman*, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2020/06/dark-side-wellness-industry>.

¹⁷² Joel Osteen, ‘Call It In,’ Lakewood Church Service, 28th July 2019, accessed 8th June 2022, available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2019/July/2019-07-28-1100-joelosteen>.

¹⁷³ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Reissued with a new Introduction 2018 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 7.

¹⁷⁴ Rakow, *Religious Branding*, 231.

¹⁷⁵ Stevenson states that the belief ‘in a fixed, linear notion of time is not consonant with the worldview held by many evangelicals.’ (*Sensational Devotion*, 40) This is based on the evangelical orientation toward affective encounters with the divine which collapses time (as I outline in Chapter Three), where pasts and possible futures are brought into the present moment. Stevenson outlines how evangelicals are not interested necessarily in historical accuracy in certain instances of staging and performance, but more in creating space for God to meet them in an embodied way, however that is achieved. Whilst Lakewood also values the affective encounter and its collapse of linear temporality, it also, paradoxically, looks forward/ upward through a linear series of events (however individually they might unfold) in the believers life towards victory and towards the end of time for the church as a whole.

evangelical trajectory creates an image of spiritual and material success. This produces a model for believers to replicate in their own lives. I propose that Lakewood’s expression of evangelicalism, in its emphasis on an upward sweep of victory and success for believers toward the teleological endpoint of Christ’s return from the sky at the apocalypse, produces a particular sky-bound orientation.¹⁷⁶



Fig. 9. Material removed due to copyright.

(You Can Live Your Best Live [Life] Now, Joel Osteen Blog, 2017, available at: <https://www.joelosteen.com/inspiration/blogs>).

A sky-bound orientation is arguably fundamental to Christianity with its focus on a God-inhabited celestial realm. However, at Lakewood, sky-bound transcendentalism is harnessed in a particular way and to particular ends, replicating the ‘capitalocene,’ the period of history in which we currently reside, where capitalism has fundamentally altered the climate and environment.¹⁷⁷ The spectacular and repetitive visual and material narration of the transcendent forms a tension with the site’s horizontality. The broader secular and ecological

¹⁷⁶ Based on the Biblical passage: ‘After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” Acts 1:9-11, NIV.

¹⁷⁷ See Jason W. Moore, ‘The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis,’ *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:3, 2017: 594-630, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036); and Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: Pm Press, 2016).



Fig. 10. Material removed due to copyright.

(Are You Receiving When You're Believing? Joel Osteen Blog, 2017, available at: <https://www.joelosteen.com/inspiration/blogs>)

contexts makes the contradictions and paradoxes at Lakewood particularly pronounced. At Lakewood there is a concerted effort and concentration on transcending human limitations, looking through matter (arguably looking through *what matters*) in order to go above and beyond what is humanly possible. The whole site works to direct attention up to God, and imagines a divine gaze directed benevolently down. The sky-bound gaze is directed via spectacular images and performance to look away from the body within the world, to gaze hopefully and expectantly upward, even looking through the weather and incoming clouds. This gaze is toward to an imagined celestial God who will one day return so that believers can reign with Him, with the apocalypse reserved only for the unsaved. It is an imaginary extrapolated from the teleological, redemptive story arc of the Bible, inflected with the capitalist 'success' stories of Houston and America into a victory story, which is embodied and perpetually imaged and performed by the Osteen family. This success story is imaged as a move toward the greater good, for it appears to believers as though the benefits speak for themselves. A Time poll in 2006 identified 61% of all American Christians as agreeing with the statement 'God wants people to be prosperous.'¹⁷⁸

Houston is a city that has grown and expanded geographically, economically and in influence through the striking of oil and the subsequent establishment of the petrochemical industry. The city's ethic of ambition, speculation and hard work have enabled industrial capitalism to establish and thrive. Whilst the city grew, the foundations for Lakewood's success also grew. Darren Dochuk has emphasised how religion and oil worked symbiotically to found an imaginary of America as an exceptional nation. Dochuk describes how, for the oil-patch evangelicals,¹⁷⁹ God's provision of oil was perceived as a blessing for the righteous, and the wilderness a resource to be dominated and utilised. Believers understood that oil had been divinely bestowed to mould America into a godly society in advance of Christ's imminent return. Black gold's mystical, otherworldly abundance subsidised America's churches, schools, missionary organisations, cultural centres, charities, museums

¹⁷⁸ Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*, 124.

¹⁷⁹ Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 39-41.

and foundations¹⁸⁰ and became instrumental in creating a century of America: a global paragon of hard work manifesting God's blessings of profit and progress. Paving the way for a future escape from poverty and crisis, it proved America's White settler dream of America as a land of individual opportunity and wealth. The oil industry combined with American religiosity to make evangelicalism a dominating global force.¹⁸¹ By 2021, founded on the success of the oil and energy industry, Houston had become a major corporate centre hosting 20 Fortune Global 2000 companies. Despite oil industry booms and busts, it is one of the worlds' largest centres for petrochemical and oilfield manufacture, and leads America in gas and oil exploration and production. Texas is the sixth largest producer of oil in the world, and Houston houses almost a quarter of publicly traded U.S. oil and gas companies including Shell, BP, BHP Billiton and CITGO.

In Lakewood's story-world, the sky-bound imaginary is intended to encourage and assist believers in their own success story, enabling them to fit into contemporary American society as ideal citizens. Through God they can cope with whatever difficulties arise, whether unemployment, divorce, job precarity, disability, illness or abuse. Success is always on the way. When victory seems elusive and problems arise, these are framed as a temporary test of faithfulness, because God is always acting behind the scenes to deliver on His promises. Signs of some success are an indication of more to come. Individual salvation materialises as physical, material or emotional achievement and fulfilment. This is as important as the saving of other souls. Success is an indicator of God's blessing on earth, of salvation inscribed into the material realm. This can be achieved through believers aligning of their thoughts and words in accordance with God 'on high.' In *I Declare: 31 Promises to Speak over Your Life* Osteen applies the victorious, linear teleological orientation of Lakewood's narrative: 'You've got to send your words out in the direction you want your life to go... You give life to your faith by what you say... don't talk about the way you are. Talk about the way you want to be.'¹⁸²

Images within Lakewood's online platforms and screen-based projections visualise this heaven bound journey, with the intrepid believer standing on the high point of a cliff or mountain, looking out over a landscape or looking up to the sky. Multiple images of skies and the cosmos are also depicted, overlaid with positive and encouraging phrases. This teleological movement occurs over the course of an individual's life as they embark on a journey of faith and also the life of the church as a whole as it journeys towards converting the world before the end of time. During worship it is embodied through the believer reaching toward a divine presence, often literally with hands lifted up. The believer is secured by an orienting story but their gaze is sky-bound. In a recent Lakewood service, the sky-bound orientation was repeatedly reinforced throughout the service. Osteen, contrasting those who become low in spirit by looking down at their earthly, material realities and problems, states that believers, whilst not denying them, should not focus on their circumstances but: 'Lift up your eyes and the King of Glory will come in,' 'God says, lift up your head!' and 'Keep your eyes looking up!' Using the example of God telling Abraham to look up, he exhorts: 'Look up from where you are... and see your healing, see your dreams coming to pass.' Osteen, referring to the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of hope for immigrants

¹⁸⁰ Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 9, 13, 17.

¹⁸¹ Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 10-11.

¹⁸² Joel Osteen, *I Declare: 31 Promises to Speak Over Your Life* (New York: FaithWords, 2012), v-xii.

arriving in a 'promised land,' uses the expression 'beacon of hope.'¹⁸³ As he physically raises his Bible at the start of each service with his right arm, Sødal states that he visually mirrors the statue's Roman goddess Libertas, blending American and religious identities and values.¹⁸⁴ Likewise, Osteen's repeated allusion to dreams ('dare to dream big dreams,' 'follow your dreams,' 'don't decide for lesser dreams,' and 'resurrect your dead dreams') replicates the idea of 'the American Dream' of social and economic success.¹⁸⁵

Joel Osteen, as a figure for the divine made manifest through earthly success, appears as a sky-bound entity, familiar but out of reach. But this sky-bound imaginary, in looking through material reality to a perfectly embodied future in this life, and a perfectly disembodied future in the next, fails to note the real threat that arrives with the clouds, not the returning hero son but the gathering dark clouds of hurricane season that do not, despite imaginaries of protection, discriminate between believer and non-believer. Looking through the human enmeshed in more-than-human connections to an imagined vertical realm, the believer risks losing their stable ground. The increased frequency and threat of the dark clouds of the hurricane are a direct result anthropogenic climate crisis, arising from the largely Western cloud of belief in human exceptionalism and an imagined separation between nature and human culture through which global free market capitalism operates. These beliefs intensify within an American evangelicalism that is entangled within this paradigm. Contained in the Sanctuary, a climate of belief, based on imaginaries of bodily wholeness and healing, swirls. But the reality is that the bodies bring inside the effects of a polluted climate. And here a paradox, a tension arises between the story-world and lived experience. This tension has the potential to provoke a hardening of belief in response to a threat, but can also produce its' opposite. As a rupture opens in the experience of the story-world, other possibilities enter.

This sky-bound imaginary is narrated through a repetition of Lakewood's success story. Bowler relays the story of the 'prosperity gospel,' a trans-denominational Protestant movement founded on the belief that believers have a right to claim health and wealth as part of God's promise. Bowler traces its history as a product of American social changes. Categorising Lakewood within this movement, she writes of the mythic leadership trajectory within 'prosperity gospel' churches at large:

Their biographies—from their childhood, conversion, and family life to their rise to fame and their empire building—became the narrative glue of virtually every sermon, book, and piece of merchandise to emerge from their churches. To their fellow pastors, they were sovereigns of ministerial kingdoms, whose coveted endorsements, preaching platforms, and financial support fuelled the aspirations of the thousands below them.¹⁸⁶

Lakewood began in 1959 with a congregation of ninety in a borrowed, dusty warehouse. Paralleling American ascendancy from the Great Depression through the twentieth century to become a global power, Lakewood's expansion to become North America's largest megachurch and global phenomenon seemingly signifies God's

¹⁸³ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 217.

¹⁸⁴ Sødal, "Victor not Victim," 41.

¹⁸⁵ See Sødal, "Victor not Victim," 42 (Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 19, 13; Osteen, *Become A Better You*, 19; broadcast of 6 April 2008, no longer available).

¹⁸⁶ Bowler, *Blessed*, 6.

divine intervention. Dramatically portraying the obstacles and shadows of possible failure to create narrative tension, the Osteens endlessly repeat their family ‘rags to riches’ myth-history and the church’s expansion and movement toward success. The story goes that faith, particularly vocalised faith, smooths the way for God to deliver everything He has in store. In messages, books and social media content, there is a constant repetition of various iterations of ‘your best days are ahead,’ ‘the victory is coming’ and ‘he will make your paths straight.’ In Lakewood’s ‘New Beginnings’ booklet the first page ‘The Lakewood Story,’ forms a summary of the overarching history and themes of the church. It begins: ‘Its origins were humble’ and goes on to document the church’s ascendent rise to global prominence.¹⁸⁷ Likewise, at the beginning of every service held at Lakewood church a film of ‘The History of Lakewood’¹⁸⁸ plays, compressing sixty years of history into ninety seconds of seductive mythology. Several iterations of a film documenting Lakewood’s history have been produced,¹⁸⁹ the first focusing on the formation of the church until it finds its’ home in the 8,000 seater sanctuary.

This older version begins to the soundtrack of a slide guitar, with a reconstruction of the converted feed store where John Osteen first set up his Pentecostal congregation. The deep tone of a professional voiceover artist sets up the unlikely beginnings of a sanctified version of an American success trajectory, the story of the untrammelled growth of the church. The narrator explains: ‘it wasn’t a very big start... Since that humble Mother’s Day beginning in 1959, Lakewood church has grown in more ways than could ever have been imagined.’ The narrative is tidied to create a simple seamlessness. The story must be coherent, and easy to digest. The feedstore is shabby. Weeds grow up through the holes in the floor, there is no running water and the new members have to clean and fix it. The film sets up a rhetorical conflict, drawing the audience in - will the church survive? From a human perspective, it seems doubtful.

The soundtrack promptly switches to a faster pace and harmonising choral voices over an image of breaking light amongst swirling clouds on a blue backdrop, echoing the blue skies that are repeatedly deployed throughout Lakewood’s visual and material culture. This is interspersed with photographs of the church at different stages in its evolution, growing from a new 700 seat sanctuary in 1973 and then more than doubling in size until it becomes one of America’s first megachurches in 1988 with a 8200 seater sanctuary. Growth is explicitly imaged as a sky-bound journey. The voiceover explains the importance of people at Lakewood, particularly: ‘people with vision and people who never give up. People who want to make an impact on the world.’ These people are consummate Americans - people who have faith, who work hard and are ambitious. Despite the modest start: ‘it didn’t take Pastor John Osteen long to expand their boundaries from outside that small building to the community, the city, the nation and eventually, the world.’ The film cuts to Osteen preaching and working as a missionary in India. These missionary trips, described as ‘crusades,’ organize the

¹⁸⁷ Lakewood, *New Beginnings*, 2-3.

¹⁸⁸ ‘The History of Lakewood Church,’ Lakewood Church YouTube Channel, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGkuJ14ewCc>.

¹⁸⁹ ‘A Lakewood Legacy,’ Lakewood Church YouTube Channel, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfEYUg7J-fA>; ‘Lakewood Church John Osteen Beginnings in Fort Worth TX,’ Lakewood Church YouTube Channel, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbVR7Lg4PxQ>; ‘Lakewood Church - A New Era,’ Lakewood Church YouTube Channel, accessed 7th June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6uXnJkTxVA&list=RDLVs6uXnJkTxVA&start_radio=1&rv=s6uXnJkTxVA&t=72; ‘Joel Osteen – How did his church begin?’ Lakewood Church YouTube Channel, accessed 7th June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZtfcN_cak.

building of schools and hospitals but they are driven by the propagation of a message. As the film cuts to a scene of an industrial sized warehouse with his products being shipped out, we are told that ‘millions’ of books, tapes and teaching materials telling the good news story are given out around the world. His mission has been to ‘reach the unreached and tell the untold.’

The film returns home, panning over the wetlands along Houston’s Gulf Coast. Mirroring the White American evangelical imaginary of a beacon on a hill, John Osteen effectively exports a Charismatic Pentecostalism inflected with late twentieth century Texan-American identity as a democratic movement of faith, but it is also an over-writing, a colonizing of other cultures. The film loops back to the abandoned feedstore with the voice posing the question: ‘if a small group of people from an abandoned feedstore could leave that kind of legacy, just think of the impact today’s Lakewood could have on the world.’

The global influence of Joel Osteen’s Lakewood is conveyed in the current film version of Lakewood’s history. It is slickly professional and emotive, a relay of images showing key moments from Lakewood’s history up and literally into the present moment.¹⁹⁰ Foregrounding the importance of Joel Osteen’s TV production ministry, it opens in what appears to be a dusty storeroom. In this nostalgic scenography, an old fashioned cine film reel clicks and begins to play, as a spherical sign displaying the words Lakewood Church that once hung on John Osteen’s lectern lights up. On the floor lays the old sign from the feedstore that reads ‘East Houston Feed and Hardware; Chows Purina’ in block lettering. Around the edges of the room are storage boxes, film reels and a large spot light. Imaging the history of Lakewood’s expansion, a hard hat sits on the boxes along with an architectural blue print for an earlier version of Lakewood’s Sanctuary, emphasizing rebuilding and growth as an essential part of Lakewood’s history. On a projection screen in the centre of the room the film plays the reconstructed scene of the original church service at the feedstore from the first film. It is overlaid with an echoey soundtrack of John’s declaration of faith: ‘This is my Bible, I am what it says I am...’ The film pans back until the projected film fills the whole screen, showing archival footage of people streaming into the rebuilt 8,000 seater church in the 1980s and John and wife Dodie pastoring their flock, smiling faces amongst the crowd. A cinematic sounding orchestral soundtrack plays, surging affectively. In this film, the selection of spoken audio is notable for its positive, therapeutic focus: ‘We’re here to lift you (cuts to a shot of John lifting a baby in the air) and not put you down.’ It cuts to show Joel Osteen in his role in TV production, supporting his father as a now popular televangelist, and then focuses on Joel, Victoria and their two children standing holding hands in front of the iconic backdrop of the Houston city skyline taken at Sam Houston park for the new era of Joel’s leadership, the image of a handsome, modern family in a global city. The film sequence then moves to Joel and Victoria Osteen being handed a golden key signifying their tenancy of the Compaq Centre, which we now view not on the projection screen but a boxy late 20th Century TV monitor, synchronous with the timeline. Footage of the Compaq Centre signage being removed with a crane cuts to arial footage of Lakewood’s exterior in the present, at night, spectacularly lit up, surrounded by lights from the cities skyscrapers and beams from cars passing on the freeway alongside it.

¹⁹⁰ A slightly different edit of the version I’ve detailed above (no longer available) can be found at: ‘Our History,’ Lakewood Church, accessed 7th July 2022, <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about/history>.

The film reaches a double climax both through visual and auditory spectacle as it follows a suited man into the top row of the Sanctuary at the start of a Lakewood service. On the screen we see the thousands strong crowd in the auditorium raise a colossal cheer as the music surges and Osteen announces ‘How do you like your new home? Looks pretty good doesn’t it?’ A series of fast paced cuts move from coloured lights flashing out across the stage with worship in full flow, smiling volunteers welcoming churchgoers at the entrance, Joel Osteen preaching, his son (to whom the leadership will be passed) and daughter leading from the stage. His older brother Paul Osteen is shown briefly on his medical missions trips, followed by arial footage of Joel and Victoria’s ‘Nights of Hope’ stadium tours. Sister Lisa Osteen Comes is pictured preaching at Lakewood, cutting to Joel baptising children and young people. People are always smiling. The images constantly move, one scene replaced by another, demonstrating a flowing of time but a consistency of message - growth, prosperity, divine destiny. The film comes to an end with Joel Osteen shouting the Lakewood declaration: ‘I will never be the same, never, never, never, I will never be the same, in Jesus name, Amen!’ An ascendant soundtrack ends with a crescendo as a view bursts onto the screen of 16,000 worshipping bodies lit up in the Sanctuary. The film, as it is played in the Sanctuary at the start of the service, is then timed to cut to the second parallel climax of the immense volume of in real life worship. In the shift from representation to the real, the body experiences a selective but upbeat history of progress and success as a result of faith, inculcating and embedding the body in the affective mythology of Lakewood. The sequence is spectacular, linear, teleological. It founds Lakewood’s mythology.

Literary theorist Robbie B.H. Goh points out the tendency of megachurches to constantly highlight their growth and to link this to greatness.¹⁹¹ A repeated foregrounding of Lakewood’s 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.’¹⁹² 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.

This cinematic opening to every service acts as a foundation upon which the rest of the meeting is built. Both films foreground the communication technologies that are so central to the Evangelical ontology, from the printed word of the Bible held aloft, the performance of preaching disseminated via radio, TV and internet broadcast, through the documentary films moving from scratched analogue cinefilm to high definition digital video. It performs the mythic underpinning of a shared history of Lakewood. David Morgan writes that myth, as the substance of enchantment: ‘bestows meaning on the world...sees things coming from an origin and progressing toward an end...Myth shows that the things that happen do so for an underlying reason. Myth is

¹⁹¹ Goh, ‘Hillsong and “Megachurch” Practice,’ <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183408X376665>.

¹⁹² Goh, ‘Hillsong and “Megachurch” Practice,’ 296.

about purpose and the power and hope and social cohesion and transcendence that such purpose offers human consciousness.¹⁹³ Mythic narratives, in their reinforcing repetition, provide a powerful orientation - a terrestrial, correct and authorised way of being a human in the world. The overarching story of the myth directs the believer toward an end point, producing a sense of purpose. These meta-narratives explain knowledge and experience, own the weight of legitimation, encircling communities within the totality of a moralizing and authoritative framework. The mythic trajectory here is one of exceptionalism, human significance and divine success.¹⁹⁴

This mythology was replicated on July 16th 2005, when 56,000 people gathered for Lakewood Church's grand opening at the newly renovated site on the Southwest freeway, making it the largest church facility in North America. Sitting in the front rows were Texas governor Rick Perry, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and numerous other politicians and celebrities. The children and grandchildren of John and Dodie Osteen took to the stage. Behind them, the projection on the three vast high definition screens above depicted a blue sky with white cumulus clouds drifting by. During the service, the Osteen family recited Lakewood's mythic trajectory. The family were surrounded on either side by water features, gentle cascades on a controlled timer flowing past plant life protruding from replica rocks, creating a soothing ambience. Also behind them, the golden globe slowly rotated. Son Paul reminded the crowd that the children of Israel entered the promised land by walking through the dry bed of the Jordan river when God parted the stormy waters before them. To commemorate this miraculous event, Joshua was commanded to gather the rocks from the river bed and assemble them into an altar so that the Israelites wouldn't forget God's gift. The Osteen family then assembled their own altar, a cairn made from the word-things of Lakewood's history. An old wooden chair from the borrowed feed store warehouse reminded the church how far they have come. Grandson Jonathan held John Osteen's dress shoes, symbolising his preaching and his missionary zeal. John Osteen's heavily annotated Bible was held up, an image of a book which formed a compass and road map to an eternal destination. Lastly, a large golden key, symbolising the acquisition of the site, inscribed 'December 1, 2003', the date the lease was signed, pictured the Lakewood logo covering the Compaq Centre one.¹⁹⁵ The performance reminded the crowd and its global following that Lakewood had ascended from a borrowed school, a revival tent, a dilapidated feed store, and an ever expanding building that has grown from a church for several thousand to this vast multi-storied superstructure. The objects convey rise of Lakewood, via an exceptional patrilineal leadership. John and Joel Osteen embody the American success story, ordained by a benevolent God. Evangelical megachurch leadership acts as an exemplar of prosperity, success and divine blessing, a linear trajectory in which the human is uniquely significant and is destined to predominate and subdue the world around it.

Demonstrating the church's entanglement in American imaginaries at large and an avoidance of complex reality, Bowler writes that:

¹⁹³ David Morgan, 'Enchantment, Disenchantment, Re-Enchantment,' in James Elkins and David Morgan (eds.) *Re-Enchantment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 13.

¹⁹⁵ See Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 35-37.

The prosperity gospel guaranteed a special form of Christian power to reach into God's treasure trove and pull out a miracle. It represented the triumph of American optimism over the realities of a fickle economy, entrenched racism, pervasive poverty, and theological pessimism that foretold the future as dangling by a thread.¹⁹⁶

John Osteen, influenced by his involvement in the Word of Faith movement, frequently preached on the idea that God will respond to the right requests, and that through a speaking out in faith divine power can be channelled into everyday reality - an alluring mix of literalism and magical thinking. This belief in a divine transaction produces a paradoxical relationship to worldly materiality: whilst the things of this world are looked through as merely a shadow of God's kingdom to come, it also bolsters the belief that success or 'blessing' is signified by material acquisition and comfort, and 'inscribes materiality with spiritual meaning.'¹⁹⁷ The transcendent is favoured over the material which is only significant when it is transmitting divine power. Joel Osteen has continued the victory narrative within his leadership of the church. For Bowler, Osteen embodies soft prosperity.¹⁹⁸ Whilst hard prosperity deploys formulas for the delivery of wealth, for example inscribing your request onto your tithe cash or cheque and directly links material wellbeing to believer's level of faith,¹⁹⁹ in the soft prosperity message, wealth and health are achievable if believers follow the fixed principles of faith filled words.

The Word of Faith movement, for Miller and Carlin, began as a type of 'poor people's movement' composed of those with greater aspirations, reflecting its roots in the democratic, equalizing force of Pentecostalism. However, the economic system and its inequalities are a background that is not addressed.²⁰⁰ Both Sodal and Miller and Carlin note that the make-up of Lakewood's congregation is fairly evenly divided between Whites, Blacks, and Latinx with a small population of Asians, roughly mirroring the racial makeup of Houston.²⁰¹ There are estimated to be 400,000 illegal immigrants living in Houston, and the church is likely to host a number of them.²⁰² Sodal points out that statistically, due to the preponderance of Blacks and Latinxs, the majority of members are likely to be economically disadvantaged: 'Osteen's audience is not primarily well-to-do and well-educated.'²⁰³ For those who are confronted with structural barriers to success and wealth, Lakewood's message that you can reap rewards simply by aligning yourself with greatness is a seductive but misleading proposition.

Osteen focusses on victory and the belief that barriers for the believer will crumble as God opens up a prosperous future. These beliefs arise from an American social imaginary: values of individualism, rugged self-reliance, perseverance over adversity, liberty, freedom to choose, positivity and optimism. This social imaginary

¹⁹⁶ Bowler, *Blessed*, 7.

¹⁹⁷ Bowler, *Blessed*, 8.

¹⁹⁸ Bowler, *Blessed*, 125.

¹⁹⁹ Proponent of hard prosperity gospel and author of *The Tongue: A Creative Force* (England, AR: Capps Pub., 2010) (3 million copies sold) Charles Capps commanded his mortgages to be gone and paid in full, leading to the success of a housing division he'd taken out multiple loans on in faith (Bowler, *Blessed*, 98). The "hundredfold blessing" was deployed to suggest that whatever you invest in the gospel will be returned to you one hundred times over as a 'money-back guarantee.'

²⁰⁰ Miller and Carlin, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,' 46.

²⁰¹ Miller and Carlin contend that this is a result of Lakewood fulfilling the many functions of racial minority congregations but additionally offers: 'the chance for personal transformation and assimilation into a unified, successful, multiracial body of believers. Miller and Carlin, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,' 45.

²⁰² 'Houston, Texas Population 2022,' <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/houston-tx-population>.

²⁰³ Sodal, "Victor, not Victim," 39. Sodal also notes that immigrants, both legal and illegal are likely to attend, whilst Miller and Carlin point out the rarity of such a diverse congregation in the religious landscape. Sodal, "Victor, not Victim," 8-9.

can also be linked to an American Republicanism of individual responsibility and freedom of the market. Twitchell, Maddox, Sanders and others,²⁰⁴ expanding on Max Weber's proposition of an affinity between Protestantism and capitalism,²⁰⁵ highlight parities between the megachurch and consumerist capitalism. A number of scholars have dated the expansion of the megachurch from the 1970s when the number of megachurches in the US tripled in a decade from 50 to 150,²⁰⁶ which arguably coincides with the emergence of global neo-liberalism. This connection is evidenced in a freedom and expansion in the religious marketplace in relation to what churches offer. Stevenson, drawing on the history of evangelical revivalists such as George Whitefield, writes that since the 18th Century: 'American evangelicalism has been an entrepreneurial venture in which believers utilise popular media in innovative ways in order to commodify personal, affective religious experiences, a strategy that evangelicalism's democratizing theology intrinsically validates.'²⁰⁷ Not only prosperity gospel preaching, but the megachurch strategy of using customer surveys to determine church culture, their entrepreneurial pastors and top-down management show the integration of consumer capitalism. Business models have been adopted by megachurches wishing to grow in number and expand their influence, whilst also seeking to impact business culture in turn by offering training courses for business leaders with a Christian perspective.²⁰⁸ American evangelicalism and free market capitalism are mutually supportive endeavours.²⁰⁹

Bill Hybels, co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church, a 'seeker' campus megachurch in Chicago, is famed for his deployment of marketing to reach the unchurched of the baby boomer generation. In Hybels' rejection of tradition,²¹⁰ the site looks more like a civic centre, corporate headquarters, or landscaped park than a religious building. Its auditorium seats more than 7,000 people, and weekly attendance stands at 18,000 across seven satellite sites. Hybels, who is no longer involved in the community due to sexual misconduct allegations, is founder of the Willow Creek Association and creator of the Global Leadership Summit. Hybels is also an author of a number of Christian books, particularly on the subject of Christian leadership. He has partially ascribed the success of the church to the influence of Peter Drucker, a management guru who contributed to theories of marketing and management in the mid 20th century.

Previously, Hybels had grown a church youth group to over 1,000 attendees by introducing multimedia, dramatic retellings and modern music into the meetings. He took a consumer oriented approach to founding Willow Creek,²¹¹ surveying his local community to find out why they were no longer churchgoers, and set out to address the disaffectedness of those turned off by boring, preachy sermons. His target audience of 'unchurched Harry' – the suburban, well-educated, professional adult males, 25-45, married with children, speaks to evangelical values

²⁰⁴ James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 47-108; Marion Maddox, 'Prosper, Consume and Be Saved', *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 1 (April 2013): 108–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303213476108>; Maddox, "In the Goofy Parking Lot," <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768612440954>; Sanders, 'Religious Non-Places,' <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531605>; also see William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) for the links between evangelicalism and capitalism more generally.

²⁰⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1930: 2001), 123.

²⁰⁶ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 6-7; Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 114-115; see also Ellingson, 'New Research on Megachurches,' 249.

²⁰⁷ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 13.

²⁰⁸ Maddox, "In the Goofy Parking Lot," 154.

²⁰⁹ See William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²¹⁰ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 122.

²¹¹ Named after Willow Creek Theatre in Illinois where they first met.

of the traditional family, heteronormativity, patriarchy and participation in the capitalist labour market. Hybels described his church as being purposely designed to look like the secular buildings that non-religious people frequent. He states: ‘What we want him [‘unchurched Harry’] to do is just say, ‘I was just at corporate headquarters for IBM in Atlanta Wednesday, and now I come to church here and it’s basically the same.’ Neutrality, comfort, contemporary, clean: Those are the kinds of values we want to communicate.’²¹² Willow Creek employs two MBAs, has a consulting arm, and sells products and services including webinars, DVDs, books and training guides to its 11,000 sister churches within the Willow Creek Association and beyond. During his time as Senior Pastor, he hung a poster outside his office that asked: ‘What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?’

Some commentators have framed the adoption of marketing, branding and business models by churches a dynamic and exciting way to stay relevant within contemporary society. Willow Creek is an apposite example of how the call to evangelise, the saving of souls, trumps all other priorities, radically shaping the materiality and culture of the evangelical church to make it relevant and appealing. Such leaders are framed as visionary, displaying a religious innovation, a savviness and resourcefulness that offers community, belonging and purpose within the shifting religious marketplace.²¹³ Miller and Carlin write: ‘churches must find ways to incorporate enough “secular culture” to break down sociological barriers while still remaining true to their theological commitments. Lakewood does this by creating an entertaining environment amiable to secular or everyday consciousness while presenting the Christian message in somewhat non-theological terms.’²¹⁴

The evangelical marketplace for religious products has also expanded with books, music, clothing conferences and training reflecting consumer culture and suggesting an overlap between economic and religious markets. Religious products extent out belief into the rest of life. Stevenson writes that: ‘Evangelical dramaturgy’s commitment to commodification, whilst certainly mercenary to some degree, also reflects a sincere attempt to help believers (physically) carry devotional experiences into their daily lives.’²¹⁵ The large Lakewood shop not only stocks a wide range of Christian literature, visually foregrounding Joel and Victoria Osteen’s bestselling books, but also contains Christian music, toys, interior décor, fashion items and an ‘inspiration cube’ with Joel’s messages recorded onto it. All products are inscribed with a variety of Christian messages. Narrating the gospel for the contemporary consumer shapes the parameters of the church, the aim of drawing in the unsaved dictating its form and identity.

Lakewood, founded on the divine success of the Osteen family, uses canny tactics of branding, marketing and influencing to tell a story, leading to its global popularity and a series of best-selling books, stadium tours, conferences and concerts. Joel Osteen has stated: ‘Half the people who watch us don’t go to church. ...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

²¹² Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 123.

²¹³ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 3.

²¹⁴ Miller and Carlin, ‘Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,’ 31.

²¹⁵ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 35.

marketplace, and so that's what we try to do.'²¹⁶ Within the church, consumer capitalism is deployed to connect with and convert the ungodly. Luke Winslow writes that: 'Osteen's connection from the spiritual to the material allows him to define the market as a logical extension of God's natural law.'²¹⁷ Underlining the confluence of the social and economic context of belief outside the church with belief within, Bowler points out that not only does the prosperity gospel deify the American dream of upward mobility, hard work and moral fibre, contributing to a nation of self-made men, it also: 'affirmed the basic economic structures on which individual enterprise stood.'²¹⁸

By prosperity gospel pastor standards, Joel Osteen is restrained. Miller and Carlin typify Osteen as less overtly financially focussed than some prosperity gospel preachers, his references to promotion, increase and acquisition are set within a broader conception of blessing, blooming and enjoying life.²¹⁹ Compared to some who own private jets, fleets of cars and multiple houses, he only owns one home, flies commercially and as of 2008, no longer draws a salary from the church.²²⁰ He does, however make money from stadium tours, merchandise and sales of books, the first of which sold four million copies leading to a \$13 million dollar advance on the second. Osteen lives with his family in a 17,000 square-foot mansion in River Oaks, with an estimated value of \$10.5 million. He is, according to some of his congregants, a 'winner.'²²¹ Osteen repeatedly tells anecdotes from current and past family life in his preaching and writing that display a relatively easy and privileged life, but key mythic moments are the most repeated, for example his initial reluctance to take up the mantle of leadership and a more public role on the advent of his father's death, and his surprise at his subsequent achievements which he attributes to God's guiding hand. In a nation where economic inequality continues to widen²²² he is, however, an exemplar of divine blessing on those who align themselves with the authority of scripture.²²³ He narrates, through image, performance and text, a stabilising story in which humans are predestined by God to overcome.

²¹⁶ Joel Osteen, 'Our Ministry: Joel Osteen,' Joel Osteen Ministries, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.joelosteen.com/our-ministry>.

²¹⁷ Winslow, 'The Imaged Other,' 264.

²¹⁸ Bowler, *Blessed*, 226.

²¹⁹ Miller and Carlin, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,' 34.

²²⁰ Juliana Kaplan, 'Joel Osteen's taxes: What's probably true and what isn't,' Insider, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/joel-osteen-rich-taxes-wealth-ferrari-twitter-2021-7?r=US&IR=T>.

²²¹ Edward Luce, 'A preacher for Trump's America: Joel Osteen and the prosperity gospel,' Financial Times, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/3990ce66-60a6-11e9-b285-3acd5d43599e>.

²²² Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kochhar, 'Trends in income and wealth inequality,' The Pew Research Centre, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>.

²²³ Edward Luce, 'A preacher for Trump's America: Joel Osteen and the prosperity gospel,' Financial Times, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/3990ce66-60a6-11e9-b285-3acd5d43599e>.



Fig. 11. Lakewood Church Drive, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

During one of my visits, Osteen's sister Lisa Osteen Comes exhorted the congregation to: 'Stop putting a question mark where God put a period.' During a recent message series she quoted Billy Graham as saying: 'I've read the last page of the Bible, and it's all going to turn out alright!'²²⁴ This upward sweep of victory is an orientation that becomes materialised repeatedly within Lakewood as a literal 'looking up,' through sky-bound metaphors, images and texts that direct believer's gaze away from earth bound realities.

This sky-bound teleology of evangelicalism is echoed in the propagation of an eschatological belief that whilst God works all things for good and salvation is the cure all of society's problems, the arc of history is bending towards the 'End Times': a final reckoning between forces of good and evil and renewal when Jesus will return (from the sky) and a new heaven and earth will be created. The faithful will be tested during this age to come but can ultimately rely on God to rescue them into glory. This narrative arc of redemption and rescue creates both a fearful cleaving to the collective body (imaged as a rescuing lifeboat, reflecting traditional Christian architectural symbolism and imagery of the church as a boat) and an urgency to save all unbelievers. Osteen's uplifting, simple messages of hope tend to be replicated by other preachers who take the stage at Lakewood, but occasionally there is a contrast. Joel's brother Paul Osteen usually provides more overt Biblical content in his preaching. In Paul's 2007 sermon, entitled 'Final Instructions for Jesus' Disciples,'²²⁵ he outlined the seriousness of the great commission, of sharing the faith with the 2.5 billion people in the world who have never heard the good news. He stated, uncharacteristically bluntly for Lakewood, that unless unbelievers

²²⁴ Lisa Osteen Comes, 'Facing the Future without Fear Part 2: The Rapture of the Church,' Lakewood Church Service, 17th March 2022, accessed 7th June 2022, available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/March/2022-03-16-1930-lisaosteencomes>.

²²⁵ Paul Osteen, 'Final Instructions for Jesus' Disciples,' Lakewood Church Service Message, December 30, 2007.

convert, they will ‘spend eternity in a Christ-less eternity, in a place called hell.’²²⁶ However, it is overwhelmingly Joel who sets the tone and culture at Lakewood and other preachers tend to fit in with the expectation of Lakewood as a positive place. His popular, unfrontational message of hope despite material circumstances brings believers into Lakewood and into evangelicalism globally. This orientation opposes Latour’s ‘earthbound’ orientation of those who face the earth, telling earthly stories required for engaging with environmental catastrophe that appears to have been predicted in Revelations.²²⁷

The eschatology of the sky-bound orientation is demonstrated in Lisa Osteen Comes recent series (March 2022) on ‘Facing the Future Without Fear: Signs of the End Times.’²²⁸ Quoting Luke 21:28 which exhorts the believer to ‘look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near,’ Osteen Comes states: ‘That means you will see Jesus coming in the clouds, so our future is secure.’ Osteen Comes tells her listeners that they do not need to live in fear because: ‘The bottom line is, we win because we are in Jesus...we will reign with Jesus for ever and ever’ after Jesus has ‘snatch(ed) us away to heaven during the rapture,’ leaving behind the unrepentant to face tribulations on earth. In relation to Lakewood’s Houstonian context of attempts to dominate space, this sky-bound orientation seems apposite.²²⁹ This sky-bound orientation produces a nature-culture binary, reinforcing hierarchies of God first, the human second but bound up in a divine plan, and all else as background.

Lakewood’s marketing and branding through its events, conferences, social media content, television, radio, book sales and stadium tours all continue the repetition of its orienting mythic histories and sky-bound positivity. These tools are deployed to perpetuate a grounding story. It extends its story-world beyond the bounds of the site to encompass all who seek anchoring imaginaries. However, despite Lakewood’s racial diversity, there is a failure of leadership to recognise that worshipping bodies are interconnected with and interdependent on an enveloping world destabilised by climate crisis. A passivity towards social justice and activism in the here and now is produced through the belief that this world is a temporary shadow of the greatness to come. Action tends towards individual material acquisition and fulfilment, saving bodies and souls within evangelical orientations, where the overriding belief is that God is in control and He will deliver blessing for believers in both this life and the next, regardless of how circumstances might appear. Song lyrics declare: ‘He’s coming on the clouds.’²³⁰ In the next chapter, I consider how this upward orientation of the sky-bound gaze is materialised within narrative texts in the church.

²²⁶ Paul Osteen, ‘Final Instructions for Jesus’ Disciples,’ 2007.

²²⁷ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 248.

²²⁸ Lisa Osteen Comes, ‘Facing the Future without Fear Part 1: Signs of the End Times,’ Lakewood Church Service, 10th March 2022, accessed 7th June 2022, available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/March/2022-03-09-1930-lisaosteencomes>.

²²⁹ Elon Musk, whilst not based in Houston, echoing the sky-bound orientation away from the earth and the relentlessness of positive thinking, has stated: ‘I think fundamentally the future is vastly more exciting and interesting if we’re a spacefaring civilization and a multiplanet species than if we’re or not. You want to be inspired by things. You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great. And that’s what being a spacefaring civilization is all about.’ ‘Making Life Multiplanetary,’ YouTube, accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdUX3ypDVwI>.

²³⁰ Leeland Mooring, ‘Lion and the Lamb,’ 2016, Track #6, *Have It All*, Bethel Music, 2016.

Chapter Two: Lakewood as a Porous Container

1995. I am nineteen years old. At University, the Christian Union forms my sole friendship group within my first semester. In my early twenties I join a large evangelical church, largely comprised of young people, students and families. The pastor is tall, good looking and combines a visionary intensity with complete confidence in his own authority. He is a gifted storyteller, and his messages are memorable, entertaining, and easily digestible. His sermons draw on the Bible, but they also provide broader life lessons – an amalgamation of his research into popular psychology and business theory. Anecdotes, humorous reenactments and reflections give way to a serious message. We need to change, align with the God of the Bible. We must belong, believe and behave.

I feel called by God to be a missionary. My behaviour is increasingly subsumed by the teaching that there should be less of me, more of God in my life, by the idea that I should distrust my own instincts and thoughts, but to trust only in God, as revealed in scripture. I struggle with guilt over secular, ungodly desires for unchristian things when, instead, I should be devoted to prayer and Bible study.

The pastor takes several young men under his wing to train them in church leadership. When preaching, they all sound curiously similar, saturated with a total belief. We meet together during the week in different sized groups. Friday nights are University Christian Union nights, Sunday is church, in between are weekly house groups for prayer and Bible study, an accountability group to whom I confess my struggles with sin, a mentoring course and a leadership group. A full time year-long voluntary programme at the church aims to train the largely youthful members of the congregation in church leadership and mission.

The church quickly expands under the dynamic leadership of the pastor until it grows to four services on a Sunday and becomes standing room only. The city's largest nightclub goes into administration on the day that the pastor decides a larger building is needed. It is offered to the church. It smells of stale beer and smoke, is infamous for its' mattresses laid out in the darker recesses of the club, but it is cavernous enough to contain a growing congregation. The walls are painted over, a new carpet laid over the old sticky one. It is sanctified by prayer and the influx of worshipping bodies. The services on a Sunday night are filled with a palpable sense of expectation and excitement. Each week, the darkened room fills with young people facing a bright stage on which the God-men leaders stand and speak. The rhythmic vibrations of upbeat music pump out and through a crowd that is charged with affect. 500 new people joined in the first few weeks alone. I leave every Sunday night feeling high. I am consumed by evangelicalism, swallowing the teaching of its charismatic male leadership without question.

Jeanne Halgren Kilde writes of the: ‘complex relationships between space and worship, architecture and meaning, religion and society.’²³¹ Religious communities meet in spatial, visual and material conditions which communicate and embed ideas and meanings, altering belief and practice.²³² In Joel Osteen’s messages, sacred and profane is translated into favoured and unfavoured, success and failure. At Lakewood, categories of sacred and profane are materialised and imagined through binaries of up and down, and inside and out. As stated, narrative texts can be artefacts that take a number of forms: ‘language, imagery, sounds, buildings, or a combination thereof.’²³³ Inside the spectacular, bowl-like space of the Sanctuary, these texts transmit and embed Lakewood’s beliefs in a therapeutic and teleological, sky-bound narrative. These texts are knowingly deployed to create imaginaries of what is included and excluded from the bounds of the community, (re)shaping belief and practice.

The imaginary of a godless world outside is narrated as a place that is populated with those who need to be rescued and brought into the safe bounds of the church where they can realise their dreams of victory. This communicated via an immersion in an affective, multi-sensory total artwork that conjures an elemental world. God is imaged is a rock, a stable ground and a lighthouse amidst the stormy seas of life within preaching and song lyrics whilst oceanic waves are projected onto huge high definition screens. When Lisa Osteen Comes urges believers to ‘Get in the arc!’, Lakewood is explicitly and implicitly imaged as a ship that is destined to sail away from a volatile world destined for destruction. The texts give rise to sensations of orientation and disorientation, producing collective atmospherics that form into a climate of belief, explored in Chapter Three.

In order to examine the narrative forms and how these communicate what appears to lie both within and outside the bounds of the church (as I will demonstrate Lakewood is a porous container, there is no clear material distinction between outside and in, merely an imaginary of enclosure and difference), I use the binary imaginaries of verticality and horizontality (relating to a sense of order) and totality and exclusion (producing a feeling of belonging). I look for these spatial and embodied dynamics that create hierarchies of sacred and profane, but demonstrate this separation as much more complex than these imaginaries suggest. They work across the distinct narrative forms, expressed visually, materially, aurally and textually in architecture, the design of the Sanctuary, and screen based imagery. The performative vocalisation of Lakewood’s story is explored in Chapter Three, here I focus on objects, images and texts. Whilst others have described these phenomena in megachurch culture, my focus in this project is how its story is experienced by the porous container of dis/believing body, enclosed within Lakewood’s Sanctuary. Being part of the crowd is uncritically imagined as entering into an endlessly open, but also equalising mass of bodies, where the distinctions of other identity markers fall away, and the category of ‘believer’ is all that matters. But the reality is that there is no level playing field and some bodies are marked by other identities that put them at a disadvantage within the wider context. As I address in Chapter Three, Lakewood is enmeshed with a White American evangelicalism that contributes to a volatile climate, provoking a tension between the sky-bound orientation of the site and earth-bound

²³¹ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 9.

²³² Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 11.

²³³ Bal, *Narratology*, 5.

realities. The effects of climate change are not equally experienced, with those most affected demarcated by race, gender and disability. The imaginaries of Lakewood's story-world occlude the recognition that the bodies within the site are subject to unequal power dynamics both in and outside of the church.

Lakewood's Orientations: Horizontal-vertical

Exterior

Houston's topography is wide and flat, a sprawling web of roads bracketed by super-sized buildings. In the centre, skyscrapers reach heavenward, colonising the blue. At regular intervals all along the road, the outline of the state of Texas has been imprinted into the concrete, a permanent reminder of state pride. A freeway sign reads: 'Everything is bigger in Texas!' Alongside Lakewood the pale grey ribbon of the Southwest Freeway creates the constant hum and movement of a city made wealthy through the petroleum industry. SUVs and pick-up trucks slip endlessly past. All manner of churches punctuate the horizon, from tiny clapboard gospel huts to monumental megachurches in post-modern architecture proclaiming 'VICTORY' on their freeway signs. Crucifixes point up toward a watchful presence in the clouds.

Houston's skyscrapers demand the pedestrian to look upwards, but on the outskirts of the city and on the endless stretches of freeway, the flat topography draws the eye to the horizon. A hot sun beats down from above, but clouds, typically in the afternoon in hurricane season, converge and far off a line of grey appears and draws closer, expanding to fill the sky. Lakewood is situated in Greenway Plaza, surrounded by commercial office buildings housing petroleum distributors, drilling contractors, petrochemical manufacturers, energy and health insurance companies and real estate trusts. From the outside, Lakewood looks corporate. The building is indistinguishable from the hotels, car dealerships and private hospitals that line the freeway. Converted from a basketball stadium for the NBA Houston Rockets in the early 2000s, it is almost impossible to guess that it contains a church aside from the logo. Fourteen flagpoles bearing the star-spangled banner extend skyward along the car park exit road. Corporate branding is evident in a three-dimensional sign planted into the lawn, welcoming visitors to Lakewood Church. The logo is a circle enclosing a simple trisected line, suggestive of both a fire breaking out of a circle, and a dove in flight, both symbols of the Holy Spirit in Christian tradition. The breached circle might also suggest Lakewood as a porous container - the church in an exchange with a secular world. On the south side, a concave black wall rises to the height of the façade, peeling outwards from the concrete and glass like the cover of a monumental book. It is dissected into a grid of rectangles, reminiscent of pages, suggesting the authorising text this community is founded upon. It is offset by a pale stone border and neat rows of flowering bushes and bedding plants. The building's skin is formed of precast concrete panels that have a pink tinge in certain lights. Whilst Lakewood's crowd is diverse, it exists within a world where White privilege continues to exist.



Fig. 12. Lakewood Church exterior, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

Houston is home to thirty-seven megachurches, more than any other American city. The combined weekly attendance at those churches is more than 640,000, or roughly the population of Nashville.²³⁴ Megachurch architecture differs widely, from plain to decorative, from overtly religious to disarmingly secular in appearance.²³⁵ Goh and Loveland and Wheeler point to the importance of scale as a powerfully communicative sign within megachurch architecture, with megachurch builders considering size an important marketing device to suggest authority, influence, power and popularity.²³⁶

Within Lakewood's topographical context, both horizontal and vertical orientations materialise in the site. Loveland and Wheeler state that, architecturally, most megachurches exhibit a horizontal rather than a vertical orientation²³⁷ and Lakewood aligns with this model. Despite its five storey height, the building echoes other secular architecture along the freeway that is low and wide. This forms a contrast with the vertical thrust of historical church architecture, spires pointing heavenward, the kind of churches that served as: 'powerful statements on the landscape' and 'potent players in the U.S. cultural milieu,'²³⁸ visually and spatially communicating their status as substantively different spaces. Lakewood's horizontal architecture points to its

²³⁴ Ryan Holeywell, 'In Houston, the Land of Megachurches, Religious Service Attendance Declines,' Rice Kinder Institute for Urban Research, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://kinder.rice.edu/2016/04/25/in-houston-the-land-of-megachurches-fewer-people-attending-religious-services#:~:text=The%20city%20has%2037%20megachurches,Nashville%2C%20according%20to%20that%20database>

²³⁵ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 127; Loveland and Wheeler write that: 'each megachurch devised its own architectural philosophy' L Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 178.

²³⁶ Goh, 'The Experience Megachurch,' 44; Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 179.

²³⁷ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 178.

²³⁸ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 199.

‘seeker’ focus, in its adoption of a secular structure and its emphasis on low tension with secular culture, it seeks to minimise the difference between secular and religious culture and environment. It spreads wide - both architecturally and through global communications and reach - a reminder of its’ foremost aim to convert all of humanity.

Loveland and Wheeler trace the development of the megachurch through various architectural forms – from the revival structures of the Great Awakenings such as tents, tabernacles, to the adoption of secular buildings as meeting places: barns, schoolhouses, courthouses, halls and unused theatres and eventually into the design of the auditorium church.²³⁹ Both Kilde and Loveland and Wheeler examine the influence of the theatre on performative oration in the church. This proved influential in the development of church structures from the revivals onwards. Historically, Puritans demonstrated an anti-theatricality, disapproving of Roman Catholicism’s sinful appeal to the senses and emotions over rationality in their ceremonies and rituals, whilst the theatre was considered an irreverent site of questionable morality. However, in the early 18th Century, the evangelists of the First Great Awakening abandoned the Puritan emphasis on reason and began to deploy ‘theatrics’ in their preaching²⁴⁰ in order to reach all classes of people. A heightened emphasis on listening and the visibility of the performance of the preacher shaped church design toward the inverted cone of the amphitheatre, where sound travelled upwards and all sight lines were trained upon the stage, the centre of action. Church began to replicate the theatre and the concert hall.²⁴¹

Early church design contained the ‘affective piety’²⁴² of revivals. This emotive and participatory experience included dramatic sermonising, altar calls (exhortations by the preacher to come to the front of church for prayer for salvation), the anxious seat (a bench for those with a troubled conscience to receive prayer for peace), and believers participation through sharing ‘testimony’ (stories of God’s intervention).²⁴³ Cementing this architectural shift, the new wave of evangelicals of the late 19th Century: the Pentecostals, Holiness people and fundamentalists who weren’t welcome in mainline churches, re-emphasised mass evangelism.²⁴⁴ Practical, secular building design became the overriding priority, a ‘decisive influence.’²⁴⁵ A material simplicity contained the intense embodied worship of the growing revivals. Echoing the lack of institutionalism of the early movement, the need for practicality and the emphasis on evangelism, Loveland and Wheeler write that: ‘virtually all evangelicals agreed that the church building was not a sacred place. Nor was it an end in itself. Some regarded it simply as a tool for “ministry.”’²⁴⁶ Within the evangelical imaginary, saving souls takes precedence over the temporary, worldly matter of the bricks and mortar of the church, a belief arising from the Biblical metaphor of the church being formed only of believing bodies, with Jesus Christ the cornerstone.²⁴⁷

²³⁹ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 21.

²⁴⁰ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 22-24.

²⁴¹ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 30; Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 6.

²⁴² Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 15-20.

²⁴³ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 32.

²⁴⁴ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 81.

²⁴⁵ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 81.

²⁴⁶ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 127.

²⁴⁷ ‘Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.’ Eph. 2: 19-21 (NIV).

The body as the site for Godly encounter eclipses the visuality and materiality of the building. For Loveland and Wheeler, horizontality: ‘reflected megachurch people’s discovery of an immanent deity.’²⁴⁸ This belief in an immanent God, able to intervene in everyday life and meet believers in divine embodied encounter during worship, manifested in architecture that was familiar, easy to access and non-threatening.

Many non-denominational evangelical megachurches today mirror the familiarity of secular places of leisure, entertainment and work: the shopping mall, cinema, sports arena, university campus or and business complex. Megachurches additionally offer a range of community services and the accessibility of extensive car parks addressing a drive in culture.²⁴⁹ George Sanders describes megachurch buildings as ‘corporate.’ He links them to Auge’s concept of the non-place: sites that lack distinguishing features or contextual references reflecting the banality of consumer capitalism.²⁵⁰ In ‘Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerades,’ a study of how global architecture replicates and reinforces neoliberalism in covert ways, Keller Easterling compares commercial chains or franchises with spiritual organisations. She notes how they repeat their spatial imprint globally, borrowing from each other’s repertoires of business strategies, marketing techniques and spatial formats, being both utopian belief systems that ‘love real estate.’²⁵¹ Commercial organisations borrow the efficacy of religious message spreading and subsume it into marketing, whilst spiritual organisations borrow the spatial forms of the mall or office block. In these sites, ‘beliefs, associations and rituals become the material of capitalist exchange’ and are, ‘construed to be progressive steps toward innocence and perfection.’²⁵² Both the utopian aspects and the corporate banality occlude participation in neoliberal logics.

However, ‘horizontal’ architecture is not the only narrative text. In contrast to the expansive, all-encompassing horizontality, a verticality at Lakewood directs attention away from the socially, politically and ecologically interconnected bodies in the crowd. Inside the Sanctuary, the ‘less obvious’²⁵³ vertical orientations communicate a sky-bound emphasis, demonstrating how Lakewood is a religious site oriented toward a transcendent God ‘on high,’ in tension with its human and more-than-human contexts. This sky-bound orientation produces a misplaced sense of threat. This is imagined as the threat of being outside the safety of the church and its orienting story-world when the apocalypse comes, rather than the threat of the volatilities of anthropogenic climate crisis that does not discriminate between believer and non-believer.

Interior

As the congregant enters into the Sanctuary, different narrative texts create both vertical and horizontal orientations, communicating God as both intimate within the crowd and high above. It is capacious, artificially bright and spectacular inside the 16,800 seater Sanctuary, encircling the congregation in a curved, bowl like

²⁴⁸ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 260.

²⁴⁹ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 131.

²⁵⁰ George Sanders, ‘Religious Non-Places’, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531605>, 71; Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 2nd English language ed (London ; New York: Verso, 2008).

²⁵¹ Keller Easterling, *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerades* (Cambridge, Mass. London: MIT Press, 2007), 73.

²⁵² Easterling, *Enduring Innocence*, 95-96.

²⁵³ Goh, ‘*The Experience Megachurch*,’ 40.

structure. Most of the space is formed of huge grids of tiered, comfortable seating upholstered in blue fabric. Giant high definition screens hang above a wide luminous stage, bracketed by choir stalls to the left and right, big enough to house two hundred and fifty singers. The ceiling lights shine through a vast expanse of undulating nylon cord fishing nets, reminding us that Jesus is a fisher of men, forming an effect of rippling clouds or waves, resembling a magnificent sky or ocean.²⁵⁴ The lights shift through an array of colours throughout the service. Above the choir stalls, facing the congregation, are midnight blue screens punctuated with an array of tiny lights, suggesting a cosmological display of shooting meteorites. The stage has a central orchestra pit, but no overtly religious symbols. Upon the stage stands the slowly rotating golden replica of the globe, mirrored at the back above the seating by a large United States flag.

Lakewood's 'functionalist aesthetic'²⁵⁵ is adapted to the needs of the service, to the professional and immersive communication of a story to a very large crowd. Whilst the architecture and stadium structure is largely practical, it contains a range of texts that communicate both spectacularly and implicitly. Erica Robles-Anderson, for example, detailing the complexities of belief, architecture and media technologies within the megachurch dubbed the 'Crystal Cathedral' writes that these kind of churches are: 'emblems of collective



Fig. 13. The crowd repeated on screen at Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

²⁵⁴ The nylon cord fishing net light installation was based on a design spotted at a Cirque de Soliel performance. The nets hanging high over the heads of the crowd reference, perhaps unwittingly, Jesus as a fisher of men. See Stephen Ferry "Pulling Off No Small Miracle" *AWCI*, accessed Jan 21st 2022 <https://www.awci.org/media-archives/construction-dimensions/511-pulling-off-no-small-miracle>.

²⁵⁵ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 259.

orientation along a vertical dimension, or the sacred, achieved through the material arrangements better associated with uniquely horizontal dimensions of sociality. In other words, they are the sites whereby mythic cosmology enters a new technological regime.²⁵⁶ Within Lakewood, the vertical dimension is communicated through texts of interior and stage design, and various analogue and digital communicative forms: the screen based imagery and music that foreground the crowd in relation to a deity both intimately close and high above. An imaginary of verticality at Lakewood is implied by vertical metaphors of ‘taking the high road,’²⁵⁷ ‘lift me up,’²⁵⁸ ‘rise up,’²⁵⁹ and ‘reach higher,’ combined with repetitive imagery of clouds, skies and cosmos swirls, and Biblical stories of meeting God at the mountain top, of ‘the most high God.’

However, in contrast to this vertical dimension, the horizontality of the exterior within a flat topography extends into intimate encounters with a God who can intervene at a human level, and the adoption of secular ideas and beliefs of self-help, empowerment and success. Additionally, the visual horizontality of a vast multi-racial, multi-generational crowd forms into an imaginary of a democratic, non-hierarchical community, shaped by the ideal of the Bible verse: ‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’. Gal. 3:28, NIV). However, as previously noted, the make-up of the congregation at Lakewood is likely to be economically disadvantaged. The Osteen family’s relative wealth, power and visibility in relation to church members creates an appealing image of divine success to which congregants can aspire. Through their familiarity, their emphasis that they are ordinary, their rags to riches mythology, divine success seems within reach for the congregant, if they can follow the Osteens’ faith-filled positivity. The focus upwards toward God, with the Osteens symbolically embodying divine power, is imagined above the human realm, but reaching down in divine encounter and intervention. This is repeatedly imaged on the Sanctuary screens and in social media output through sky and cosmos. Joel Osteen and other members of the family visibly take on great prominence as a conductor for divine flow.

Wherever the congregant is situated in the bowl of the Sanctuary, the tiered seating arrangement of the radial-plan amphitheatre trains the gaze onto the stage where most of the activity takes place, allowing for good visibility and acoustics.²⁶⁰ The traditional raised pulpit situated the pastor high up and cut off from the congregation, as a mediator between human and divine. At Lakewood, similar to other megachurches, a small, moveable lectern made of plexiglass is used, adorned only with the Lakewood logo. This allows the preacher to

²⁵⁶ Robles-Anderson, ‘The Crystal Cathedral,’ 580.

²⁵⁷ Lakewood, ‘Win the War Within,’ Instagram post, 2nd May 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdCS-RdMEMP/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.

²⁵⁸ Lakewood ‘A Prayer for Today,’ Instagram post, 29th April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc75TjbscTc/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.

²⁵⁹ Joel Osteen, ‘Rise up and go after your dreams,’ Instagram post, 13th May 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdfurgfPrch/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.

²⁶⁰ In the aftermath of the revivals the elevated pulpits of earlier church design gave way to the radial-plan amphitheatre with comfortable, cushioned seating rather than lines of straight backed pews, see: Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 58; Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 11. Bigger crowds demanded better acoustics. English evangelical and revivalist John Wesley estimated a crowd of twenty thousand people at his first meeting in Gwennap Pit in Cornwall, a hollow created by mine subsidence that made a natural amphitheatre, see: Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 17. The amphitheatre design enabled sound to carry upward to banked seating through the inverted cone of the room, a shift from the visual nature of pre-Reformation Christian worship towards a linguistic and aural experience, see: Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 31, and Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 11.

be almost fully visible and to move around the stage further creating drama,²⁶¹ not hiding behind an obstructive barrier. He is imaged as a teacher, but an accessible one.

However, this arrangement of space to accommodate the crowd and to prioritise the acoustic, a seemingly horizontal orientation, collides with the vertical hierarchy of visibility and power. The congregant is physically oriented to face a larger than life, celebrity preacher who carries a divine authority. Goh, analysing the ‘performativity of the mega,’²⁶² writes that the stage: ‘is constructed to be a zone of prominent and substantial activity, conferring significance to those individuals permitted to stand there.’²⁶³ The charismatic presences and brands of celebrity preachers of predominantly male megachurches dictate the life and culture of their churches.²⁶⁴ Osteen and others in the family are visually prominent. During the service, cameras for broadcast are trained on the stage but are most often focussed on close ups of Osteen, followed by other leaders. The views shift between the group/ individual on the stage, broader views of the crowd within the Sanctuary and occasionally a sweep across it, more rarely focussing on a few congregants actively engaged in worship or listening. Joel Osteen is located at the top of Lakewood’s visual hierarchy, bracketed by the past and future male leadership of John and Jonathon, followed by other family members, the worship team and other leaders and invited speakers, and lastly the crowd as a stand in for humanity, a diverse, multi-racial, multi-generational group.²⁶⁵

In the bookstore, the Osteen family are the first faces you see on the lightbox displays and the Osteen’s range of bestselling books (his face is featured on the front of most of them), arranged to greet the customer as they enter. When I visited in 2019 during the ‘Sixty years of Lakewood: A Legacy of Hope’ celebrations, past images of the family from the 1960s to the present were enlarged to huge banners and wall displays. In the main banner, Joel Osteen was almost central and well lit, reaching the height of a wall, Victoria Osteen a similar size but backgrounded slightly and in profile. Johnathon Osteen, despite his smaller size, had a central position, whilst daughter Alexandra Osteen was off to one side. Worship leaders were pictured en masse, the crowd an almost indistinguishable array of faces. A set of posters on one wall detailed the Lakewood journey of securing and renovating the Compaq Centre, framed as a divine intervention brought about by Joel Osteen stepping out in faith and claiming the site for God. On the exterior wall of Lakewood facing the freeway, Osteen’s own logo for ‘Joel Osteen Ministries’ is located high up, visible to passers-by. This visual prominence points to the centrality of Osteen’s influence and impact on determining the values and ethos of the church. Goh details the ‘image amplification’ of leaders, reinforcing their ‘mega’ status,²⁶⁶ working in tandem with their live presence during services: ‘The size and vertical orientation of many of the images of megachurch leaders work in a

²⁶¹ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 28.

²⁶² Goh, ‘*Hillsong and Megachurch Practice*,’ 288.

²⁶³ Goh, ‘*The Experience Megachurch*,’ 46.

²⁶⁴ Goh, ‘*The Experience Megachurch*,’ 44.

²⁶⁵ Goh writes that the Pastor is most often shown on screen, then worship leaders, down to zooms onto crowd and individuals occasionally shown to picture engagement in worship. Image amplification also reinforces the “mega” status of key leaders, so that they are literally larger than life, looming over the congregation from the high projection screen. (Goh, ‘*The Experience Megachurch*,’ 47). Alexandra Osteen, despite her relative inexperience as a singer, is placed at the centre of the Lakewood music group in their marketing photography.

²⁶⁶ Goh, ‘*The Experience Megachurch*,’ 47.



Fig. 14. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)



Fig. 15. Joel Osteen on the main screen, Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

similar fashion to reinforce stature and authority at a basic cognitive level... These ensure that the congregation is literally and constantly looking up to the image of the lead pastor and other select leaders.²⁶⁷

Huge video screens not only amplify the importance of a leader who is physically distant in a vast auditorium, but allows congregants to see facial expressions larger than life-size,²⁶⁸ creating a sense of quasi-intimacy. Osteen shifts his gaze from in person audience to the cameras, so that both sets of viewers feel as though he is making eye contact. The influence of the Charismatic movement is apparent within Lakewood through intimate and affective lyrics in church worship where God meets with the individual, through stories told on stage of God's guiding intervention. This familiar deity is seen through the lens of Osteen's accessibility. The tiered seating, bowl like shape of the Sanctuary and wide stage enables his image and voice to carry out across the auditorium, both live and amplified through speakers, and on screen and into TV broadcast around the world.²⁶⁹ For in person viewers, even if they are situated at the back of the auditorium, the experience of seeing Joel Osteen's face full of emotion during his message, or a worship leader, eyes closed, face tilted up toward God and hand lifted high during uplifting worship, is akin to watching a livestream reality TV show, emphasising the affective experience of megachurch culture.²⁷⁰

Whilst Lakewood appears less authoritarian and hierarchical than many evangelical churches and religious institutions in general, the imaging of horizontality, of the Osteens as being part of the crowd is belied by their difference in terms of wealth, influence and power. Osteen and his family are not readily accessible to the crowd, a protective distancing highlighted by bodyguards, separates them from those outside their circles.²⁷¹

Music additionally creates a key moment in the service for a horizontal-vertical encounter with God.²⁷² There are a number of prominent worship leaders at Lakewood, including Senior worship leader Cindy Cruse-Ratcliff and Steve Crawford and Da'dra Crawford Greathouse, but Lakewood also hosts its own band, the 'Lakewood Music' group who write and produce their own work. Like much contemporary Christian music, it sounds like contemporary pop or soft rock, is easy to memorise, deeply repetitive, and typically upbeat, deploying 'simple harmonic structures.'²⁷³ Lyrics use the first person pronoun to address God personally rather than describe Him, enhancing the sense of an intimate encounter.²⁷⁴ Stevenson writes that: 'the rhythms not only engage and entrain

²⁶⁷ Goh, *The Experience Megachurch*, 48.

²⁶⁸ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 230.

²⁶⁹ As a congregant in an evangelical megachurch for several years, my pastor always appeared larger than life, both as a performative presence, also in his centrality to the vision, direction and beliefs of the church.

²⁷⁰ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 231.

²⁷¹ Multiple attempts through different channels to make contact before I visited the site in 2019 yielded no success in arranging a meeting with either Joel or Victoria Osteen. Unless on stage, he appears with bodyguards in tow. Even though I was given the email address of his P.A. after queuing to meet him, he did not respond directly. Yet the repeated visual foregrounding of Joel and other family members on screen, on book covers, TV broadcast and social media suggests an accessibility and familiarity that doesn't necessarily translate into actual contact.

²⁷² Loveland and Wheeler observe that megachurch electronic sound systems are able to replicate the acoustical capaciousness of a cathedral, making the space feel and sound vast. Likewise, during preaching, they can be used to make a large auditorium 'sound smaller' and more intimate. See: Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 232–233; Rakow, *The Light of the World*, 22.

²⁷³ John D. Witvliet, 'The Blessing and Bane of the North American Megachurch: Implications for Twenty-First Century Congregational Song,' *The Hymn* 50 (January 1999: 6-14), 7.

²⁷⁴ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 257.

attendees into the worship event, but they add memorable, emotionally rich texture to the embodied schema that the service traces into worshipper's bodies.²⁷⁵

The lighting at Lakewood is a key component of the visual spectacle at Lakewood, working in tandem with other narrative texts. Performance lighting is both practical and symbolic within Christian tradition as a prime characteristic of the divine. According to Meyer and Stolow, light not only personifies divine agency, but acts as a metaphor for revelation and knowledge acquisition.²⁷⁶ Rakow considers that: 'Lakewood Church's lighting scheme helps to transform the auditorium from a capacious meeting space for the congregation into an intimate space of individual religious worship and *vice versa*.²⁷⁷ The designer Bill Klages created the lighting scheme at Lakewood to enable a careful choreography of light to enhance music and preaching, lending it



Fig. 16. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

²⁷⁵ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 198-199.

²⁷⁶ Birgit Meyer and Jeremy Stolow, 'Light Mediations: Introduction', *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696557>, 4.

²⁷⁷ Rakow, 'The Light of the World,' 105.

greater emphasis, producing an immersive, multi-sensory experience through an array of colours and lighting possibilities.²⁷⁸ To capture the excitement of the worship section of the service for both the Sanctuary and television broadcast, he designed the lighting to be: ‘as specific and, as a result, as theatrical as possible.’²⁷⁹ Evangelical worship (including music, song, dance and prayer), for Rakow, is knowingly designed to function alongside lighting through both a horizontal and a vertical level: praise music foregrounds a communal, participatory experience, worship music provides a space for the individual to focus upwards on God.²⁸⁰ She demonstrates how the lighting at Lakewood is timed to move congregants through phases of worship, paralleling the music. The Sanctuary is well lit during the upbeat ‘praise’ phase of worship so that congregants can see each other within the crowd, creating horizontality and a sense of communality. In contrast, during the ‘worship’ phase darkness in the auditorium creates a vertical intimacy with God.²⁸¹ Rakow writes that: ‘the scarce illumination that turns the assembled worshippers into a rather indistinct dark mass... emphasizes the individual personal relation between a believer and God through Jesus Christ.’²⁸²

Böhme has written of the atmospheric qualities of light which: ‘endows things with emotional significance and...profound importance,’²⁸³ as well as creating safety and security. Within ecclesiastical architecture, the German expression ‘Holy Twilight’ (*Heilige Dämmerung*) refers to the darkened space of the church interior which, rather than harbouring the threat that darkness might usually contain, is instead ‘enclosing’ and ‘protecting.’²⁸⁴ For Bohme: ‘it gathers up the expectation forming in twilight and leads it upwards. To a Christian, this upward lift may well convey an experience of redemption.’²⁸⁵ Lakewood appears to reflect the theatrical sensibilities of traditional church architecture. This sense of ‘secret’ or mysterious space is not unlike the ‘worship’ phase of music at Lakewood, a twilight zone where attention is directed through light up towards a transcendent figure, manifesting through the light display in the ceiling. I experienced the visuality of the lighting during this darkened worship phase visually as a kaleidoscope, the light from the stage spiralling out towards me, collapsing distance and reducing resistance to the overwhelming sense of being part of something vast and significant. In concert with the heavy base of the music making my body and the emotive song lyrics, I found, despite my attempts at maintaining distance, to be emotionally moved and my disbelief temporarily challenged.

The vertical orientation of the ‘praise’ phase of worship is carried through into other vertical texts that communicate God as sky-bound. Rene Lagler, Lakewood’s production designer and creator of the stage, has had his contribution to broadcast production design recognised with an Art Directors Guild (ADG) Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017. His design created depth through the stage being bracketed by two screens lit up

²⁷⁸ Extensive but almost invisible catwalks, motorised trusses and 228 LED lights allowed for flexible mood setting. It is bright with some contrast during the message, with the most attention on the Pastor.

²⁷⁹ Bill Klages, ‘Lakewood Church – Houston, Texas,’ New Klages Inc., Accessed 8th June 2022, http://www.newklages.com/NKI_lakewood.htm.

²⁸⁰ Rakow, ‘*The Light of the World*,’ 97-98; Rakow draws on Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters. Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 175–179.

²⁸¹ Rakow, ‘*The Light of the World*,’ 97-100.

²⁸² Rakow, ‘*The Light of the World*,’ 99.

²⁸³ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 156.

²⁸⁴ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 174.

²⁸⁵ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 174.

with a permanently blue sky, white clouds scudding across it, and an additional main blue backdrop screen, more visible when the orchestra pit and globe are lowered. Above the crowd hang the lighting nets, designed by Jared Wood of Houston-based architectural firm, Studio Red. These cover the ceiling, reminiscent of clouds or waves, lit in a wash of rainbow colours according to the mood dictated by the phases of the service. They appear to move with the light, mirroring the imaginary of God above, drawing the eye and focussing attention upwards. Rakow writes that these screens update historical visual religious culture by creating: ‘a surreal visual effect of coloured clouds. One might feel reminded of classical paintings of sky and clouds on church ceilings, which here are realized in a modern, LED-rendered interpretation of a sky.’²⁸⁶

Whilst historically, the evangelical focus on architecture and design has been largely functional, as Kilde has demonstrated, theatricality infiltrated in order to maintain audience attention and commitment within the context of mainstream culture. The theatricality of Lakewood’s interior lighting design creates a contemporary echo of the historical style of the Baroque, nurtured by the Catholic Church as a means to dazzle and enchant the believer, to provoke affective response through excessive, crowded and complex artwork and design. This earlier religious theatricality arose in direct, competitive response to the austere, forbidding architecture and interior design of counter-reformation Protestantism. Through producing a total work of art that synthesised a number of artforms, it appealed to popular feeling, communicating religious themes via direct, emotional involvement.²⁸⁷ At Lakewood, Lagler worked with lighting and acoustic designers to produce what he calls the ‘wow’ factor, suggestive of a similar level of sensory engagement. He has stated: ‘In my design, I tried to give visual movement where the choir was with the waterfalls. I was then able to continue that shape all around, with the arch above, that all gives it what I call visual movement. Your eye never rests, if you will.’²⁸⁸ This constant movement echoes the complexity of baroque visual excess. Additionally, the chiaroscuro formerly deployed by Baroque painters can be seen in the lighting at Lakewood, the strong contrasts between light and dark interacting with other elements in the service, increasing dramatic effect. The high production values, the drama and theatricality of design and lighting are as enchanting and entertaining for the crowd as any contemporary large scale cultural event.

Baroque trompe l’oeil paintings in seventeenth century Catholic churches utilised perspective to create illusions of reality, further producing a sense of phantasmagoria, a dreamlike or fantastical appearance. The high definition screens at Lakewood relaying images of clouds floating by suggest a window in the dome like structure to see an idealised sky beyond. The central dome, a frequent feature of Baroque church design, focused attention upwards, indicating the importance of a union between the heavens and earth, and allowing light to flood the nave. These domes were often painted with skies filled with sunbeams or angels. Within the bowl shape of the Sanctuary, instead of natural light, attention is directed upwards toward light coming through

²⁸⁶ Rakow, ‘*The Light of the World*,’ 93.

²⁸⁷ See: Gauvin A. Bailey, *Baroque and Rococo*, Art & Ideas (London ; New York, N.Y: Phaidon, 2012); Michael Kitson, *The Age of Baroque* (London: Hamlyn, 1976); P. Cannon-Brookes and C. Cannon-Brookes, *Baroque Churches*, Great Buildings of the World (Feltham, New York: Hamlyn, 1969) et al.

²⁸⁸ Quoted in Michael S. Eddy, ‘Slam Dunk: Lakewood Church,’ Live Design, accessed 4th July 2022, <https://www.livedesignonline.com/business-people-news/slam-dunk-lakewood-church>.

the rippled mesh nets. These wave-like clouds might be compared with the rippling folds of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's marble sculpture the 'Ecstasy of Saint Theresa' (1647-1652), where, as she experiences her mystical visions in an encounter that appears both divine and sexual, inner affect is exteriorised as her habit forms into waves.²⁸⁹ The lighting installation on the ceiling at Lakewood appears to materialise the embodied immersion in an ocean of pleasurable affect that occurs during the worship service. Additionally, the lighting display of beams of white light against a dark blue backdrop which bracket the stage are reminiscent of the lit, golden sunbeams that appear to ascend down from above Saint Theresa, directing attention to the source of the



Fig. 17. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

²⁸⁹ For a discussion of the 'Ecstasy of Saint Teresa' from a psychoanalytic perspective which highlights the work as a type of feminine jouissance, see Jacques Lacan and Bruce Fink, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, book 20 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999). For an analysis of the various critiques of Lacan's gender biased approach to the sculpture, see Dany Nobus, "The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine Jouissance: Lacan's Reading of Bernini's *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*," *The Comparatist* 39 (2015): 22-46. [doi:10.1353/com.2015.0019](https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2015.0019).



Fig. 18. Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. (1647–1652, marble.) (Image credit: Livioandronico2013, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. Available at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Ecstasy_of_St._Teresa_HDR.jpg)

sensational feeling. Böhme also references the German expression ‘Gods finger’ for the ‘transcendental’ light that appears as a downward shaft between dark clouds.²⁹⁰ This appears to be mimicked in the darkened space of Lakewood, when spotlights are trained down onto the crowd from above the stage, and move about to dramatic effect, again replicating the natural and painted light effects of Baroque church architecture, where light streamed down from Cupolas and bounced off gold and glinting objects in the interior.

Texts of preaching and song lyrics reinforce this imaginary of a transcendent-immanent God, brought down through worship and praise into the Sanctuary, into the future bodies of believers for a divine intervention toward success. Cognitive associations or metaphors of upward movement, ascension or height with positive

²⁹⁰ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 174.

emotional states, physical power, and success²⁹¹ aligns with an imaginary of God as ‘on high.’ Popular songs at Lakewood describe God in vertical, transcendent terms: ‘Open the heavens O Lord, And pour out Your Spirit,’²⁹² ‘You are great and glorious, ever watching over us... there’s no other name that is higher,’²⁹³ ‘He’s high and lifted up,’²⁹⁴ ‘At Your feet the highest place of worship... Oh most high our hearts cry to You.’²⁹⁵



Fig. 19. Material removed due to copyright.
(Make Freedom Yours, Joel Osteen Blog, 2022, available at: <https://www.joelosteen.com/inspiration/blogs>)

Mountaintops and height are repeatedly referred to, extending Biblical stories of God meeting Moses on the mountaintop into an imaginary of worldly success as reaching new heights. Pastor Craig Johnson encourages the crowd: ‘Whether you’re in the valley or on the mountaintop, praise God!’ and song lyrics state: ‘I speak to the mountains.’ Osteen opens his devotional version of ‘Your Best life Now’ with an anecdote of hikers ascending a mountain and then giving up half way: ‘They lose their drive to excel, to explore new horizons, to experience vistas they’d never previously imagined possible. They have tasted a bit of success, and they think, This is good enough...No, don’t stop halfway; go on up to the top of that mountain. Believe God for more.’²⁹⁶ Meeting God on the mountaintop to receive his guidance and wisdom is subsumed, through Word of Faith preaching, into an imaginary of worldly success. In addition to this imaging of God as a celestial, heavenly being, positioned over the human realm, God is also imaged on a more human level as a ‘lighthouse,’ a beacon of light guiding believers to safety. The metaphor for life without God is one of instability, imaged as an ocean,

²⁹¹ Lakoff & Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 16–20.

²⁹² Israel Houghton, Meleasa Houghton And Cindy Cruse Ratcliff, ‘Cover the Earth,’ 2006, Track #1, *Cover the Earth*, Integrity Music, 2006.

²⁹³ Aaron W. Lindsey, Cindy Cruse Ratcliff, Israel Houghton, ‘Highly Exalted,’ 2002, Track #1, *Lakewood Live – We Speak To Nations*, Hosanna Music, 2002.

²⁹⁴ Aaron W. Lindsey & Israel Houghton, ‘Sing,’ 2008, Track #4, *Lakewood Live – Better Than Life: The Best Of Lakewood Live*, Integrity Music, 2008.

²⁹⁵ Cindy Cruse Ratcliff & Israel Houghton, ‘Only in your presence,’ 2002, Track #7, *Lakewood Live – We Speak To Nations*, Hosanna Music, 2002.

²⁹⁶ Joel Osteen, *Daily Readings from Your Best Life Now*, (New York; Boston; Nashville: Warner Faith, 2005), 3-4.

relayed in song lyrics that state: ‘You are the peace in my troubled sea...My Lighthouse, my lighthouse; Shining in the darkness, I will follow You.’²⁹⁷

These vertical and horizontal orientations embed ideas of God both transcendent and immanent. God is imaged and imagined as personal, intimate, familiar, available for a divine encounter through embodied affect, but also as celestial, who enables the individual to ascend to their potential, to heaven at the end of their life, to glory at the end of time. But these orientations stop short of examining the bodies in the Sanctuary that weather within a locale where the sun is dangerously hot, where not enough precipitation occurs and then too much, where concrete covers up a sinking, shifting ground. Kilde writes that churches carry profound meaning linking the divine to the human and establishing correct power relationships between God, clergy and laity, traditionally: ‘the holiest people nearest the altar in the chancel, lay worshippers farther away in the nave; women on the left, men on the right; whites on the main floor, blacks on the balcony.’²⁹⁸ Whilst Lakewood prides itself on its diverse crowd, reflecting an imagined equality, the image occludes existing structural inequalities, that pertain to race, sexuality, gender and ableism, which are ignored, excluded from Lakewood’s story. It is a crowd without criticality.

Lakewood’s Orientations: Totality-Exclusion

Within Lakewood, religion and secularity enmesh. Some aspects of secular life are excluded from the site, held at bay, whilst others have been allowed in, inflecting Lakewood’s story-world. Whilst the buildings and campuses of megachurches tend to replicate secular architecture to draw in the non-believer, their cultures are rooted in the history of the evangelical movement²⁹⁹ and seek to spread their message by: ‘offering an attractive religious haven within a turbulent world.’³⁰⁰ Inside the curved container of Lakewood’s Sanctuary a world-building narrative is performed. Believers are held within the structure of this story-world, a stabilising enclosure that orients toward victory. Despite an inherent individualism within the message of self-fulfilment, the individual believer, through joining this community of embodied belief becomes part of something new and all consuming. In identifying as believer, a separation from a former story outside of the confines of the church occurs. As a church with a focus on the religious seeker, Lakewood is a porous container, inflected with the allure of its secular context. However, it can also be thought of as a totality, both in the sense of a total institution that demands belonging, and also through providing the experience of a total artwork, an immersive and unique story-world, formed by its narrative texts. This totalisation is instrumentalised, by the church leaders influenced by the wider culture of White evangelicalism, toward the perpetuation of certain norms, ideals, identities and power relations.

Lakewood as a total institution, Lakewood as a total artwork

²⁹⁷ Rend Collective, ‘My Lighthouse,’ 2014, Track #3, *The Art of Celebration*, Integrity Music, 2014.

²⁹⁸ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 10.

²⁹⁹ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 215.

³⁰⁰ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 215.

A number of scholars have drawn parallels between the global megachurch brand Hillsong and Lakewood. Whilst their histories, contexts and leaders vary, there is some overlap in culture. Both are 'seeker' churches with global influence led by charismatic male pastors, descended from the male founder of the church. Whilst Hillsong has recently been embroiled in a series of controversies related to sexual misconduct and abuse, and abusive working conditions for volunteers, Lakewood has yet to succumb to any major scandal.

Sociologist Matthew Wade, in his study of Hillsong, has designated it an enchanting 'total institution.'³⁰¹ Wade draws on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, whose term 'total institution' delineated situations in which people live in close proximity over long periods and within tight hierarchies in order to work towards a single shared goal.³⁰² These groups are separated from wider society with legitimized authorities overseeing all aspects of life, and participants self-regulating their behaviour toward achievement of the collective 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 identifying factors, melding the pragmatic and transcendent.³⁰³ It is both focused on the practical aims of evangelism, of bringing *everyone* into the church and deploying all resources to that end, and on producing a shared ecstatic experience within the atmospheric encounter of the technologically mediated worship service, making church a pleasurable and seductive experience. At Lakewood there is not such an overt emphasis on voluntary participation and appears to exert less pressure on attendance and involvement than Hillsong. There is also an acceptance of engagement at a remove by temporary visitors and those watching online and through TV broadcast from around the world and, arguably, less emphasis on building a tight knit community. However, Lakewood still displays a number of aspects of the 'total institution' as seen through Wade's analysis of Hillsong.

Wade 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.'³⁰⁴ The therapeutic aspect of Lakewood's story and the adoption of a new identity as believer produces to the sense of being made anew. The feeling of reinvention within Lakewood's worship service is embedded through the incorporation into a new culture, community and lifestyle. Additionally, the impelling, persuasive voice of Osteen and other preachers and repetitious collective vocalisations are orientations which enchant.

Wade draws on Coser³⁰⁵ to further designate the megachurch as a 'greedy institution'³⁰⁶ through its aim to achieve the exclusive and undivided loyalty of its members in: 'tying the organization and all its activities to a higher, collective purpose, namely that of 'saving' the 'unsaved.'³⁰⁷ Lakewood sits within the category of a 'full

³⁰¹ Wade, 'Seeker-friendly,' 663.

³⁰² Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Penguin Social Sciences (Harmondsworth, Eng New York: Penguin, 1991), 4-5.

³⁰³ Wade, 'Seeker-friendly,' 663.

³⁰⁴ Wade, 'Seeker-friendly,' 664.

³⁰⁵ Lewis A Coser, *Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment* (New York; London: Free Press ; Collier Macmillan, 1974), 3-4.

³⁰⁶ Wade, 'Seeker-friendly,' 668.

³⁰⁷ Wade, 'Seeker-friendly,' 669. This mirrors my experiences within charismatic evangelicalism. Slowly, other activities are discouraged unless they are part of a member's outreach to the unsaved. Congregants are aware of desired behaviours, and accordingly self-regulate. Whilst there are no overtly stated rules, there are expectations in regards to social and behavioural mores. An implicit culture exists in

service' or 'seven-day-a-week' church – referring to the packed timetable of therapeutic, recreational and educational ministries and services for members that works to keep people returning and bringing others with them.³⁰⁸ Loveland and Wheeler write of the full-service church that offers community outreach: 'Whatever the service rendered...it was accompanied by a religious message...Soul-winning was the overriding aim.'³⁰⁹ At Lakewood, new seekers are encouraged to join groups and to get involved in the life of the church. Members can join Bible studies, prayer and worship sessions both in the church and in 'Life Groups' that meet weekly in members' homes. Also available are internships at the church, men's, women's, children's, finance and marriage classes and volunteer opportunities through local missions including blood drives, The Beacon Centre for the homeless, Houston Food Bank and local community projects through 'servolution.' There is also youth work through the Young Adult Ministry, a Seniors Club, a Singles ministry and 'The Champions Club' for children, youth and adults with special needs. Counselling and pastoral services includes hospital visits, marriage support and help to find freedom from addictions. Missionary activities take the Lakewood message beyond Houston, through medical missions, 'Hope and Life' conferences for young adults, 'Spark' marriage conferences, hurricane and wildfire relief distribution and aid, and rebuilding projects, food bank donations, financial assistance and telephone outreach to the housebound during the pandemic. Lakewood provides a structure and order for life, embedding seekers within the culture, meeting their needs for community, voluntary and paid work (there are approximately 300 Lakewood staff) and leisure.

This institutional totalisation is reflected in a culture where faith is instilled not only through participation in church activities, but through extending faith into all other aspects of life, so that believers carry the church with them out into the world. Faith becomes the lens through which everything is viewed, whether in work, at home, in relationships or at leisure. Christians are encouraged to have quiet times with God before the day begins, to prayerfully consider each decision, to invite God into their relationships and marriages and to see their workplace as part of their mission. Faith becomes the foundation for life. This can be seen at Lakewood, not only through the church services and the wide range of groups, services and voluntary activity in which members can participate, but through engaging in an incessant flow of digital output to encourage and accompany the believer at all times: podcasts, youtube videos and social media (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter). Osteen's books are promoted for daily use as devotionals and prayer guides. His most recent book, 'Rule Your Day: 6 Keys to Maximising Your Success and Accelerating Your Dreams',³¹⁰ enables the reader to

which deviation from certain norms and regulation of relationships and sexual behaviour, 'inappropriate' types of dress, engaging in secular culture, questioning the church risks disapproval and exclusion. Within Lakewood, it is possible, even likely, that a similar culture exists.

³⁰⁸ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 181.

³⁰⁹ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 187. However, Loveland and Wheeler draw a distinction between the comforting refuge of the white megachurch and black majority churches. For white megachurches, that tended towards social and political conservatism, the outside, alien culture formed a threat. Community outreach constituted a brief foray, reinforcing the: 'saved/unregenerate dichotomy that influenced their retreat from "the world"'.³⁰⁹ For black megachurches, the space was a refuge from a hostile white world. In contrast to the services offered by white majority churches, where activity was instrumentalised toward conversion, the economic development projects of black megachurches aimed to revitalise their localities as an end in itself and a service to the community, rather than getting more believers in through the doors. (Loveland and Wheeler, 188-189) Lakewood's racial diversity sits between these two polarities, but I would suggest that due to its repeat emphasis on evangelism, its' practical and voluntary services are ultimately geared toward the saving of souls.

³¹⁰ Joel Osteen, *Rule Your Day: 6 Keys to Maximizing Your Success and Accelerating Your Dreams*, First edition (New York: FaithWords, 2022).

bring his wisdom into daily practices of thought, attitude, emotion and action. In this way, Lakewood and Osteen's influence are never far from the mind of the congregant.

Based on my experience of attending Hillsong, Lakewood and my former involvement in Charismatic evangelicalism, I also note a totalisation of belief. In each church an all-encompassing logic or rationale holds sway. The church is seen as merely the vessel through which the literal and authorized truth of the Bible is communicated, and to question the culture of the church is framed as inverting the natural order of God over man. From this rationale extends the idea that unspiritual worldliness, including critical thinking (based on the Bible verse where God says: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." (1 Corinth 1:19, NIV) is a form of contamination, or 'deviant' thinking, unaligned to the revealed Biblical truth. This rationale subsumes all questions and resistance. It also produces anxiety and fear through the imaging of a dangerous outside. It creates a barrier to those who don't 'know the truth,' the belief that the ungodly lack spiritual or personal wholeness at one end of the spectrum, or are godless and immoral at the other. The fear of the devil (understood as an actual being within Biblical literalism) and hell (understood as an actual place), variously mediated depending on the church, creates a sense of horror and a fearful cleaving to the safety of the church.

Although Joel Osteen preaches the Bible in a markedly 'open' way, untied to theological discourse and tradition and avoiding overt references to sin or hell, the leadership's interpretation of the Bible is still the orienting device from which imaginaries arise. Ordering and correctness in relation to the authority of the Bible is paramount. It is viewed as essential to ensure that the same straight paths of lifestyle and culture (through the church's particular Biblical interpretation) are always trodden. Whilst Lakewood does not appear to be as authoritarian as other megachurches, the thinking of 'worldly' wisdom as ungodly was demonstrated at the women's group I attended, where the speaker stated: 'We don't have to be intellectual Christians. We don't need fancy words. Angels haven't seen what we can see.'³¹¹ This separation from 'worldly' thinking is reflected through Osteen's statements that God's authority overrides that of the 'experts': 'It is easy to get into agreement with the negative, with what the experts say: "They've given me the facts," "They have a lot of experience"...God can do the impossible.'³¹² Guest speaker Nick Nilson's recent message at Lakewood urged believers with doubts or questions to just 'go around them' to get to God, not through them.³¹³ Such statements reveal a subtle anti-intellectualism at work. Avoiding difficult or contradictory questions, avoiding challenges to evangelical orientations, appears to fulfil Christ's charge to have a child-like faith.

These intangible but effective means create a culture that, despite utilizing the latest developments in technology, contemporary music and branding to communicate its narrative, maintains a religious separation from a doubting, ungodly world. This engenders a strong sense of belonging, believers view themselves as

³¹¹ Taken from notes during a Lakewood Church Women's group; speaker Shirley M. Kelly, 'Better Together: Our Freedom in Christ,' 31st July 2019.

³¹² Joel Osteen @joelosteen, 2021. "The scripture says, "Two are better than one. When one falls, the other can lift him up.", Instagram video post, 27th October 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVh5T7ctjX/>.

³¹³ Nick Nilson, @lakewoodchurch, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding," Instagram video post, 14th April 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CcWLyfSsCoX/>.

‘aliens and strangers’ (1 Pet. 2:11, AMP) 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.’³¹⁴ Goffman’s statement that the total institution ‘does not so much support the self as constitute it’³¹⁵ can be applied to Lakewood, where identities become subsumed into the identity of child of God, understood as favoured, blessed, successful. This sense of immersion in a total institution provides a refuge of safety and shared values, but as evangelical megachurches, the aim is always to draw more believers inside.³¹⁶

The visual and material forms within Lakewood materialise and perform this totality. Together, they operate as a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ – a total work of art, a synthesis between building, interior and a range of visual and material texts to transmit a story-world that works to embed belief through immersive intersensory perception.³¹⁷ German National Socialist rallies of the 1930s, the operas of German composer Richard Wagner and Catholic mass, ‘that true Gesamtkunstwerk that employed all the arts and alighted upon all the senses,’³¹⁸ have all been designated total artworks. Within the field of contemporary art, Boris Groys describes the shift from traditional museum archive and display to the contemporary curatorial project producing an experience of the: ‘total art event involving everybody and everything.’³¹⁹ He traces a line from Wagner through the artistic collectives of Hugo Ball’s Cabaret Voltaire to Andy Warhol’s Factory and Guy Debord’s Situationist International to the current form of temporary projects organised by the curator as a ‘dictator-performer’ who instrumentalises a range of media within artworks to serve a common purpose. Groys writes: ‘all these elements, as well as the architecture of the space, sound, or light, lose their respective autonomy and begin to serve the creation of a whole in which visitors and spectators are also included.’³²⁰

Kilde writes that the immersive, performative aspects of evangelical church culture have been present historically: ‘in the late nineteenth century the entertaining elements consisted of oratory, musical performance, and, especially, visual spectacle created by the stage arrangement and lighting techniques.’³²¹ The technical sophistication has increased and the ideologies transmitted have morphed however into the contemporary context. Church growth experts who influenced evangelical megachurch leaders in the latter decades of the twentieth century, advised to aim for the: ‘sight-sound-sensation’ generations - the generation Xers whose culture was more visual, music led and sensory than their parents, and who responded to participatory, upbeat, multi-media worship forms.³²²

³¹⁴ George Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 144.

³¹⁵ Goffman, *Asylums*, 168.

³¹⁶ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 188.

³¹⁷ See Harald Szeemann, Susanne Häni, and Kunsthau Zürich, eds., *Der Hang Zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien Seit 1800* (Aarau: Sauerländer, 1983).

³¹⁸ Tahia Thaddeus Kamp, ‘The “Magical Bishop” of Dada: Hugo Ball and “The Innermost Alchemy Of The Word”’, in Nancy Pedri and Laurence Petit (eds.), *Picturing the Language of Images*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 360.

³¹⁹ Boris Groys, ‘Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk,’ E-Flux, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/>.

³²⁰ Boris Groys, ‘Entering the Flow,’ unpagged.

³²¹ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*, 217.

³²² Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 226.

In addition to church projects and design for TV, Lagler, Lakewood's set designer, has designed a range of significant public events including political conventions, presidential inaugurations, Catholic masses with the Pope in attendance, an event marking the centenary of the Statue of Liberty, the 50th anniversary of Mount Rushmore and Memorial Day and Fourth of July celebrations. ADG notes that his work amounts to the creation of environments for: 'historic moments that define our [American] culture and who we are as a people.'³²³ In defining who and what Lakewood is through design, Lagler assists the subtle transmission of ideology through the creation of an overarching story-world formed from a synthesis of different visual and material elements. These produce what appear to be a total world, that simultaneously images the world, but also forms a new world in its own right, an alternative space-time that appears to emerge without origin. Within this alternative space-time, a space of fabulation, correct religious identity and behaviour (based on an amalgamation of American and White evangelical norms and beliefs) is embedded within the bodies of believers.

This might be compared with Theodor Adorno's analysis of the operas of Wagner. Wagner instigated the term 'Gesamtkunstwerk' to describe his 'music dramas': large-scale epic works in which poetry, theatre and music combined.³²⁴ For Adorno these operated within the realm of the absolute illusion where the 'seams' of construction are concealed, a phantasmagoria,³²⁵ 'a natural world that has been perfectly reproduced and wholly mastered.'³²⁶ This is an aesthetic totality, where boundaries between the different arts are blurred and individual difference is negated, instrumentalised toward a new vision of German culture with nationalist overtones.

However, Wagner's efforts fail for Adorno: 'In seeking an aesthetic interchangeability, and by striving for an artifice so perfect that it conceals all the sutures in the final artefact and even blurs the difference between it and nature itself, it presupposes the same radical alienation from anything natural that its attempt to establish itself as a unified 'second nature' sets out to obscure.'³²⁷ I would argue that Lakewood also produces a radical alienation in the believer, the participant in a religious 'music drama,' from experiencing themselves as ecologically interconnected, as continuous with a lively wider world.

Ultimately, Adorno connects the total work of art to the production of a metaphysics, the transmission of ideology: 'The deceptive character of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* stems from this fact. The work of art no longer conforms to the Hegelian definition that art is the sensuous manifestation of the idea. Instead, the sensuous is so arranged as to appear to be in control of the idea.'³²⁸ Here embodied experience dictates, the sense of pleasurable immersion in a phantasmagoria being the defining element, an end in itself. Adorno writes that this form of creation is intertwined with the arrival of the culture industry, which he critiques in the 'Dialectic of

³²³ 'Lifetime Achievement: Rene Lagler,' Art Directors Guild (ADG), accessed 4th July 2022, <https://adg.org/awards/lifetime-achievement/rene-lagler/>.

³²⁴ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, (Verso Modern Classics, London, New York: [1952] 2005), 86.

³²⁵ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 74.

³²⁶ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 80.

³²⁷ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 86.

³²⁸ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 96

Enlightenment' as producing a passivity in the populace through entertaining distraction, enforcing conformity and muting dissent toward unequal power structures.³²⁹ This points to the ways in which the designer, at the behest of the leader, deploys a subtle form of power in order to deliberately manipulate and modify sensation, thought, behaviour and belief through a combination of art forms. Total artwork-like constructions convey ideologies in implicit and often unnoticed ways. Seemingly non-political or non-ideological narrative forms carry impressions and produce affective associations. These act potently within crowds from whom collective atmospheres arise, intensifying affect. Such constructions serve to shore up a communal identity, to deter or encourage certain types of behaviour. Ultimately, despite appearances, they convey certain ideologies.

At Lakewood, the total artwork, the sense of being enclosed within an originary, idealised world where belonging, order, comfort and progress are central themes, produces powerful affective response. But these imaginaries deny the realities of the wider context. The excess of the total artwork, the experiential flooding, quietens critical thought, compacted by Osteen's continual assertions not to be critical or negative, but to look to the heavens and to think positive. Adorno writes that Wagner's operas are a form of intoxication, a flooding through music,³³⁰ but the whole fails to achieve unity as the individual forms cannot be converged on the same goal. The tautological overdetermination of the end result disrupts unity. The artforms become caricatures, overly excessive, they do not 'even pause for breath.'³³¹ This has the effect of separating the audience from each other and from themselves: 'What the individual conceives of as an organic, living unity, stands revealed objectively as a mere agglomerate.'³³² This critique echoes criticism of the seductive qualities of the Baroque style as too sensual, too bloated with feeling at the expense of clear thought. Adorno writes of the intoxication of the Gesamtkunstwerk: 'a moment of reflection would suffice to shatter its illusion of ideal unity.'³³³ This critical thought seems essential in snapping out of the pleasurable spell of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

Lakewood's leadership, participating in the production of an ecstatic, originary world, fail to notice and address that imaginaries of belonging, order, comfort and progress are based on a set of exclusions and ideologies pertaining to wider American identity and history, where the issues of race, class, gender and ableism are in the grip of a fight between progressive and conservative forces. Lakewood's total artwork continues (even if unwittingly) to perpetuate norms which favour those who are already powerful, wealthy, healthy, straight, masculine and White. It does nothing to dismantle power structures in its emphasis on individual responsibility.

From the perspective of consumer culture, Lakewood as a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' can be linked to Goh's definition of the 'experience' megachurch, which he applies to both Lakewood and Hillsong. Goh extends the concept of the 'experience economy,' where goods and services now require a staging of events or experiences to create positive affective associations for the consumer, into the site of the megachurch.³³⁴ The experience

³²⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso Classics (London: Blackwell Verso, 1997).

³³⁰ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 89.

³³¹ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 101.

³³² Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 100.

³³³ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 93.

³³⁴ Goh, 'The Experience Megachurch,' 35-36.

megachurch, for Goh, deploys ‘theatre, stagecraft, spatial design, lighting, digital technology and haptics’³³⁵ offering a unique, memorable and inspiring event transmitting positive associations with the product or service. This experience economy also, arguably, privileges entertainment and embodied sensation over a more critical engagement.

At Lakewood, the visual spectacle, combined with emotive messages and songs, creates theatricality and drama, transporting and transforming the congregant through the transmission of a narrative during the worship service. Brilliant lighting displays use elaborate lighting technology usually used in large theatre and TV productions.³³⁶ Emotive, uplifting music, repetitive, memorable lyrics and a simple, hopeful message bracketed by the elemental forms of gently flowing water and landscapes and skies on screen create a sense of belonging to an all-consuming story-world. This forms a total artwork in which the divine is made manifest, belonging within a global family is found, dreams are realised and minds and bodies healed and set free.

Narrative texts also operate on a smaller scale at Lakewood, from the logo and the large capitalised Bible verse from Jeremiah above the entrance, to the framed posters, banner displays, naming of rooms, even the design of the carpet. These texts all serve a didactic purpose. They carry meaning and inculcate belief, orienting the believer within Lakewood’s story-world. The short pile carpet, for example, contains a busy array of competing elemental symbols in shades of dark blue and gold, echoing the elemental symbols in the Sanctuary. The repeat pattern is a curlicue design, resembling tumbling graphical waves or smoke spirals, interrupted by the Lakewood circular church logo of flame/ dove. At uneven intervals, tufts of fabric render a golden sun with alternating gold

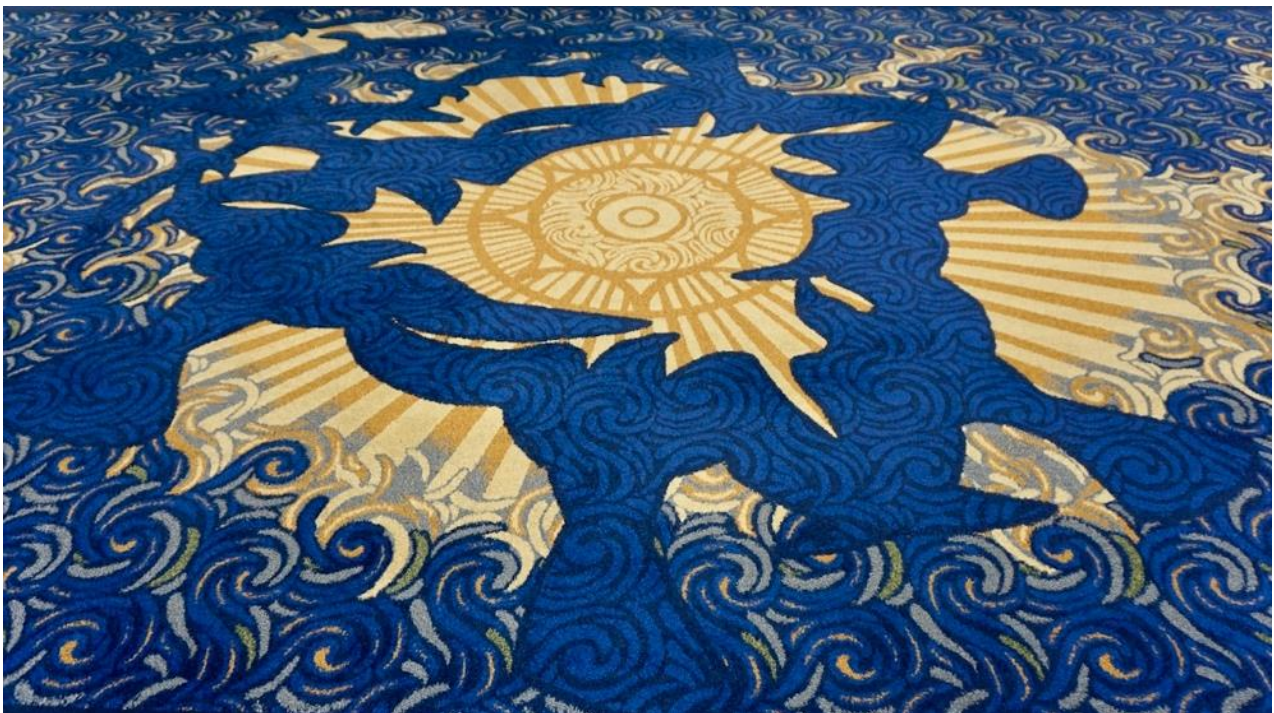


Fig. 20. Lakewood’s carpet on the mezzanine floor, July 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

³³⁵ Goh, ‘The Experience Megachurch,’ 36.

³³⁶ Rakow, ‘The Light of the World,’ 92.

and yellow beams of light, surrounded by a ring of doves, extended wings touching, a seemingly mythological arrangement reminiscent of baroque design. Over the stairs, a Bible verse from Jeremiah greets congregants on their way out of the service back into the world, literally inscribing meaning into the walls of the site: 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.' (Jer. 29:11, NIV) The congregant finds peace in the knowledge that their lives are predetermined by a divinely ordained path and the struggle will give way to success. Prior to Lakewood's renovation, the Osteen family inscribed the floor ('To God be the Glory!') before carpets were laid, claiming a new identity for the developing site, marking it as consecrated, a bearer of a different set of meanings. Lakewood's force as a total artwork, linked to its evangelical drive, is most overt in the visual repetition of the crowd and the foregrounding of its global spread and influence as a world-founding and world-dominating phenomenon. My experience of being part of the Lakewood crowd during a dizzying worship service created sensations of my bodily boundaries being breached by something overwhelming, a flood of feeling prompted by the massive visual and auditory overload. The huge crowd, repeatedly viewed in real life and on screen created a *mise en abyme* effect of limitlessness.

Goh's visual, material and linguistic analysis of how Hillsong's communicative and spatial practices materialize the 'mega' presence of God can be applied to Lakewood. He argues that the church performs the 'mega,' or a material greatness, attracting believers on a fundamental cognitive level as well as through more explicit ways.³³⁷ Hillsong's constant reinforcement of its size through liturgy and its operations, its multipurpose auditoria which are open but always full, and its use of cutting edge media 'bodies forth' the relationship with the invisible God.³³⁸ Goh suggests that Hillsong uses its own body – its size, dynamic spread and aim for its body to achieve a global reach, literally filling the world – as an image of the invisible object of God, and its main authorization of God's presence and approval.³³⁹ Whilst this is also true of Lakewood, other visual and material signs such as lighting are deployed to create a felt experience of the divine.

At Lakewood, the global crowd is similarly imaged repetitively, both live and online, through images and video footage of congregants in various activities, including global missions and charitable outreach, reinforcing the totality of Lakewood, also 'bodying forth' God's presence and blessing. Keller Easterling writes that spatial products such as megachurches strive to acquire ever more territory, aspiring to: 'establish worlds or global regimes - domains of logic that are given franchise to expand their territory with nonnational sovereignty.'³⁴⁰ In previous Lakewood sites, international flags and a list of all the countries of the world were integrated into stage design, reflecting John Osteen's missionary activities and the evangelical focus on global spread. Doric columns suggested a classic civilisation and empire that aimed to dominate the globe. Now, the golden globe sculpture is highly suggestive of global reach and significance and Lakewood's authority and evangelism around the world. Nikolas Rose suggests that: 'To govern, it is necessary to render visible the space over which government is to

³³⁷ Goh, 'Hillsong and Megachurch Practice,' 288.

³³⁸ Goh, 'Hillsong and Megachurch Practice,' 292.

³³⁹ Goh, 'Hillsong and Megachurch Practice,' 301.

³⁴⁰ Easterling, *Enduring Innocence*, 4.

be exercised. This is not simply a matter of looking; it is a practice by which the space is re-presented in maps, charts, pictures and other inscription devices.³⁴¹ Likewise, pride in American identity as a democratic, Christian nation and global leader is foregrounded in the inclusion at Lakewood of the large US flag at the back of the Sanctuary. American political and religious identities merge patriotically in the US flag and globe. Whilst the imaginary is one of a qualitatively different space, a space where God resides, there is no clear distinction between religious and secular worlds.

Ecological Contexts

Binaries of inside and out, enacted through ordering, separation and discrimination, form part of religious culture.³⁴² Holy is demarcated from unholy. However, as demonstrated, for American evangelicals, holiness has become porous: beliefs are inflected with their political, social and ecological contexts. The imaginaries of endless extraction of resources and wealth generation propagated by White traditionalists and the Christian Right, the world as merely a backdrop for the redemption story and saving of souls, appear tenuous within an increasingly perilous climate.³⁴³ The space of the Sanctuary, once the doors are shut during a worship service, is temporarily closed off from the landscape and climate in which the building is situated. As I will outline, Lakewood performs a simplified and unproblematic version of this landscape through elemental symbols that form into an originary world. Contrasting with the sub-tropical humidity of Houston snaked through with the swampy bayou, the vast air-conditioned, artificially lit space of the total artwork, comforts believers and consoles them with a message that through trusting in God He will deliver them through the storms of life. But against imaginaries of belonging/ enclosure, order, comfort and progress, the total artwork serves to alienate the believer from their ecological interconnectedness.

Lakewood's ecological imaginaries can be placed within the context of the design of three other prominent American megachurches: Saddleback Church, the Crystal Cathedral and Willow Creek. Bratton's contention that: 'for American Protestants, religious architecture and its landscape settings have long been statements of who God is and where God dwells'³⁴⁴ is demonstrated in the use of the elements as symbols of a creator God by Lakewood and other megachurches. Saddleback Church, in Lake Forest, California, was created by Senior Pastor Rick Warren, best-selling author of a number of books including *The Purpose Driven Life*.³⁴⁵ It has a weekly attendance of 22,000. Like Hybels, Warren surveyed those who'd left church and shaped his church in response. Similar to Lakewood, the church was moved through a series of borrowed buildings before the creation of its own campus, in which the landscape is visible to those within, and worship is visible to those outside.³⁴⁶ The history of and emphasis on baptism within the church led to the development of not only an outdoor baptistry, but a lake and a series of interconnected outdoor pools, artificial rocks forming a craggy cliff

³⁴¹ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 37.

³⁴² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 2, 9.

³⁴³ This is expanded on in Chapter 3, not all evangelicals share these perspectives, but those influenced by the Christian Right do.

³⁴⁴ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 12.

³⁴⁵ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. (Michigan: Zondervan, 2002).

³⁴⁶ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 140; Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 151.

over which waterfalls flow, interspersed with living vegetation. Bratton writes that: “The Edenic setting associates baptism with God’s generative acts in the original creation.”³⁴⁷ Inside the glass and steel building, ceiling height windows allow congregants to feel connected to the outside setting and bring natural light into the auditorium. Adobe, wood and earth-tone slate tiles add to the organic representations. For Warren, these natural elements enable his church to feel closer to God.³⁴⁸ Waterscapes within megachurch campuses point to the theological associations of water: baptism, sacred springs, rivers and divine rain in times of drought declare cleansing, water for the thirsty and new life.³⁴⁹ Water features in churches are also performative, creating atmospherics of flow and rejuvenation.

Water and light are also significant within the design of the Crystal Cathedral, now a Catholic church but previously home to Crystal Cathedral Ministries led by the Reverend Robert Schuller and the popular televangelism show ‘The Hour of Power.’ The church consists of a huge, twelve stories high glass sanctuary, meeting spaces, parking (the church began as a drive in in the 1960s), ten acres of landscaping, including a lawn to accommodate outdoor worshippers, and a ninety-foot neon cross. Inside the sanctuary, one wall is formed from twelve glass bays, the other from craggy slabs of stone, mirroring the elemental associations of both Saddleback and Lakewood. A 287 foot water pool inside the Sanctuary both foregrounds water as Christian symbol and mirrors the space, reflecting light and ‘dissolv(ing) the integrity of boundaries between distinct spaces.’³⁵⁰ Nine story high rear walls fold back for services, opening the space to the outside, while fountains on the inside and out (including a sculpture of Jesus walking on the water) blend the natural and man-made.³⁵¹

Robles-Anderson outlines Schuller’s employment of architect Neutra in designing the Crystal Cathedral. Neutra’s design philosophy of ‘biorealism’ – based on the interconnection of organisms and their environments – emphasised designed connections between the inside and out, the self and others, the self and the wider world. Viewed through a Christian lens, Schuller interpreted this as the necessity for a harmonious sensory state, in balance with nature, as being the prerequisite for believers’ receptivity to the preacher’s message and experience of God.³⁵² For Schuller, the building design was not just a tool for ministry but an end in itself, a way to manifest and experience Christian ideas and beliefs. Robles-Anderson writes that the event of performative worship orients the congregant and unifies “discordant elements” of the different spaces of automobile, garden, and sanctuary.³⁵³ The natural world appears present at all times through the visibility of water, plants and sky. As the congregant enters the Sanctuary of the Crystal Cathedral, the sky suddenly comes into view through the glass overhead. Robles-Anderson writes that: ‘Viewers are treated to the kind of architectural sublime generated by the verticality in a Gothic cathedral and the collective experience under a common nave.’³⁵⁴ She considers that this method of transparency undoes Neutra’s ecological theory of relation – his intention of co-ordinating multiple spaces to mirror inner life and outer world – working to separate

³⁴⁷ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 163.

³⁴⁸ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 163.

³⁴⁹ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 150.

³⁵⁰ Robles-Anderson, ‘The Crystal Cathedral,’ 588.

³⁵¹ Robles-Anderson, ‘The Crystal Cathedral,’ 593.

³⁵² Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 153; Robles-Anderson, ‘The Crystal Cathedral,’ 585-586.

³⁵³ Robles-Anderson, ‘The Crystal Cathedral,’ 589-90.

³⁵⁴ Robles-Anderson, ‘The Crystal Cathedral,’ 596.

sacred and profane worldviews. The worshipper is now cut off from the outside, only accessible through the hypervisibility of the screen through TV broadcast.³⁵⁵ A separation alongside a hypervisibility also exists at Lakewood, through its box like structure and through the mediations of broadcast and screen.

In contrast, the corporate looking megachurch campus at Willow Creek, arrived at by a winding road, is set in lawns and gardens and positioned next to a wood and a lake.³⁵⁶ Additionally, a worship trail has been created through the natural wetlands along the original Willow Creek for congregants, a reflective setting including signs with Bible verses and a trail guide. Congregants are encouraged to volunteer in the vegetable garden that supplies onsite food, and to contribute as ‘lumberjacks’ in care for the woods and waterways. Bratton writes: ‘With larger properties, multiple satellite congregations, and activities throughout the week comes a greater burden for social accountability and environmental stewardship.’³⁵⁷ She considers Willow Creek unusual, an exceptional example of a megachurch in its appreciation of and care for the wetlands and wildlife.³⁵⁸ It adopts best conservation practices,³⁵⁹ maintaining biodiversity, sowing and planting native grasses and plants.

Elemental symbols in the Crystal Cathedral are spectacularly deployed to open the believer to an encounter with God, understood as present in creation. At Saddleback, the landscape is also conducive to worship, and idealised elemental constructions of water, vegetation and rock create an ordinary scene. These churches utilise ecological imagery to point to God, instrumentalising it to embed religious belief. Willow Creek stands out in its movement beyond representation and is instead committed to engaging with its ecological context with care and sensitivity, with congregants regularly working with the animate landscape in which the church is located.

The only outside at Lakewood, beyond the walls, is a perimeter walkway to the southside, a small drive way lined by fourteen US flags, a strip of lawn, bedding plants and a few small trees. The exterior is formed of precast concrete panels. Gernot Bohme writes that in the built environment: ‘stone produces the sense of urbanity, the feeling of being in a completely humanly ordered place...In such spaces, one is seized by a kind of primitive human pride, that is, not only by a feeling of security and order, but also by one of rising above nature.’³⁶⁰ The outside is instead brought into the box of the stadium through a hyperreal mimicry. The ecological imaginary at Lakewood is formed from a combined representation of light, water, sky and ground and the repeated message in sermons, song lyrics and other textual media that life is a storm or a stormy sea that God rescues us from. God is repeatedly imaged as a rock, a stable ground, a lighthouse and the church as a boat or arc within a range of texts.

However, currently, this stable ground and the possibility of rescue is in question. The Harris-Galveston region in southeast Texas, in which Houston is located and through which the Buffalo Bayou snakes, lies to the north

³⁵⁵ Robles-Anderson, ‘The Crystal Cathedral,’ 596.

³⁵⁶ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 8-9.

³⁵⁷ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 12.

³⁵⁸ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 267.

³⁵⁹ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 283.

³⁶⁰ Gernot Böhme, trans. A.-Chr Engels-Schwarzpaul, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (London etc.: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), 177.

of the Gulf Coast and the west of Galveston and Trinity Bays. Founded by land investors on the Indigenous land of the Karankawa and Akikosa people in 1836, it was built on the coastal plain of grasslands, forested land, marsh and swamp. It has a humid sub-tropical climate, has 150 active faults and is prone to tornadoes, hurricanes, subsidence and flooding.³⁶¹ Over extraction of groundwater for domestic, commercial and industrial consumption, has altered the flows of the creeks and bayous and created an increased likelihood of severe flooding. 190 billion gallons of water from industrial and municipal wells are drawn annually. However, the water is an essential part of the clay and sand structure under the ground, and the inability of annual rainfall to replace the ever diminishing water supplies has led to areas of Houston sinking almost 2 feet in the last decade alone. Parts of Harris County have sunk 10 to 12 feet in the last century. Over 20,000 acres of land in the Houston-Galveston region has been lost to the encroaching shorelines of Galveston Bay and its tributaries as the land has sunk, and flash flooding has increased as a threat due to the impact on drainage. Houston is not built on a solid



Fig. 21. Projection on Mezzanine Floor, Lakewood Church, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

³⁶¹ See Jill Trepanier and Clay Tucker, 'Event-Based Climatology of Tropical Cyclone Rainfall in Houston, Texas and Miami, Florida'. *Atmosphere* 9, no. 5 (3 May 2018): 170. <https://doi.org/10.3390/atmos9050170>; Tom Dart 'Houston Fears Climate Change Will Cause Catastrophic Flooding: "It's Not If, It's When"' *The Guardian*, accessed 16 September 2021. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/16/texas-flooding-houston-climate-change-disaster>; The Guardian. 'Winds and Dry Conditions Fuel Multiple Texas Wildfires as Hundreds Evacuate', 18 March 2022, accessed 10th June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/18/texas-wildfires-eastland-complex-latest>.

foundation of bedrock but is instead floating on an unsteady scaffold of fine-grained Beaumont clay. Locating a populous city and the plants and industries of the world's largest petrochemical complex upon this shifting, watery platform has triggered the natural instability of a land which is the coastal equivalent of earthquake country.³⁶² Lakewood, like Saddleback and the Crystal Cathedral, also deploys water as an important elemental Christian symbol. The inclusion of a real waterfall in the original stage design at Lakewood was a risky move technically, Lorrie Foreman, Vice President of Operations for Irvine Team, the design and construction strategy company involved in the Lakewood project comments:

'You absolutely, positively should never put waterfalls in a building...And you absolutely positively should NEVER put waterfalls right next to your stage. It's bad for the mics, it affects the sound, it introduces moisture and chemicals into the environment, there's a chance that it will leak, or that it won't work, it's disruptive, but— dang, they look really good!'³⁶³

Water, for Foreman, is principally an image, a part of the spectacular interior. It was designed so that the flow could be manipulated, turned up or down based on the progression of the service. At the start of services as people were arriving, it was allowed to flow more freely, creating a pleasing ambience, and then reduced so that it would not interfere with the acoustics of the message. Water here acts as image and metaphor, its agency diminished and instrumentalised, funnelled into the artificiality of the design.



Fig. 22. The Buffalo Bayou, July 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

³⁶² John D. Harden, "For years, the Houston area has been losing ground", Houston Chronicle, last modified May 31, 2016, accessed 26 Feb, 2021, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/For-years-the-Houston-area-has-been-losing-ground-7951625.php>.

³⁶³ 'Lakewood Church: From Stadium to Sanctuary,' Technologies for Worship Magazine, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://tfwm.com/lakewood-church-from-stadium-to-sanctuary/>.

Houston is threaded through with waterways known as Bayous, which feed out into Galveston and the Gulf. The brackish water of the 53 mile long Buffalo Bayou and surrounding watershed was once dense with vegetation and wildlife, but, after almost two centuries of human inhabitation, it has been dredged, straightened, widened, deepened and cleared of vegetation numerous times to increase viability for shipping and transport. Flooding was once part of the natural ecosystem either side of the Bayou, where flowers, plants, trees had all evolved to live submerged. Upland grasses slowed stormwater, and tree roots and established groundcover absorbed it, dissipating the energy of the flood. By the 1930s and in the economic growth after the second world war most of the Bayou had been developed and paved in the natural floodplains and the remaining forests cleared, greatly worsening flooding of homes and buildings and increasing erosion along the banks. Some of the White Oak Bayou tributaries were channelised and lined with concrete. By the 1970s pollution had become a problem, with sewage runoff from poorly managed sewage treatment plants flowing into Bayou until a new sewage treatment plant was opened in 1983. The city has faced six ‘500 hundred year floods’ in the last five years. In an attempt to reduce the human impact of flooding, flood damage reduction measures including stream enlargements, clearing, channelisation, flood detention basins and diversion channels have caused loss of wildlife habitat and a reduction in water quality caused by contamination from urban stormwater runoff. Efforts have been made to restore the natural habitat alongside making it usable for human recreation, and pockets of wild can still be found in Memorial and Buffalo Bayou Parks. New vegetation is growing back in some areas with birds, animals and aquatic species returning but invasive species have since become a problem.³⁶⁴

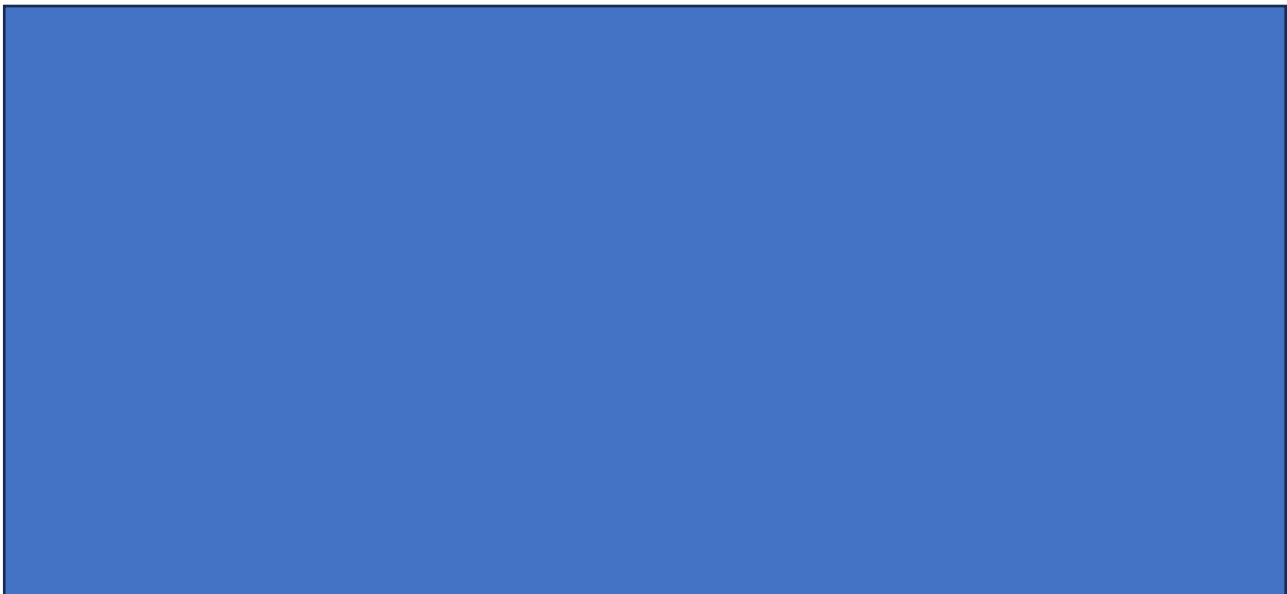


Fig. 23. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood worship during ‘Seeing Beyond the Logical,’ Lakewood Church Service, Sunday 3rd April 2022, available at 15.03 mins – 19.25 mins: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>).

The controlled and mediated flow of water within the Sanctuary, previously in the form of the waterfall, has recently re-appeared as background video footage to the song ‘Cornerstone.’³⁶⁵ The worship team, formed of

³⁶⁴ James L. Sipes and Matthew K. Zeve, *The Bayous of Houston*, (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2012), 36-39, 48-49, 59, 69-70, 75-76, 85, 102.

³⁶⁵ ‘Seeing Beyond the Logical,’ Lakewood Church Service, Sunday 3rd April 2022. Available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>

talented professional musicians and singers and backed by the large choir, relay this powerfully affective song about God's protection within the storms of life during the 'praise' phase of worship. The Sanctuary is dark except for purple spotlights, focussing attention onto the stage. The song opens with a simple piano arrangement and the abstract imagery that has been playing on the vast screen shifts to high definition footage of large waves seen from above, crashing into one another in slow motion. The white foam produces a highly aesthetic patterning against the navy blue of the dark ocean. Overlaid onto the imagery is an overlapping pattern formed by a bright, almost acid yellow filter, mirroring the white foam, further abstracting the image. There is no land, no human or other presence, only the waves crashing slowly but relentlessly back and forth on multiple intersecting screens, as the congregation joins to sing: 'In every high and stormy gale, My anchor holds within the veil, Christ alone, cornerstone, Weak made strong in the Savior's love, Through the storm, He is Lord, Lord of all.'



Fig. 24. Material removed due to copyright. (Lakewood worship during 'Seeing Beyond the Logical,' Lakewood Church Service, Sunday 3rd April 2022, available at 15.03 mins – 19.25 mins: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>).

Contrasting with this aestheticised, beatific imagery of oceanic waves which images an awe inspiring God rather than the destructive force of the flood, Houston's residents are vulnerable to both storm and shrinking coastlines. Over the course of the last century, a series of hurricanes have blighted Houston, with Allison, Ike, Katrina, Rita, Harvey proving some of the most deadly. By September 2020, only 9 months into the year, the US National Hurricane Centre ran through all 21 possible storm names, beginning with Arthur and Bertha, and resorted to using the Greek alphabet, beginning with Alpha and Beta. The Gulf Coast, dotted with bays, lagoons and inlets and intersected by rivers, is particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events emanating from the Atlantic. In 2021, a record number of hurricanes made landfall in North America, and five cyclones formed concurrently over the Gulf of Mexico for only the second time in recorded history. The gulf is also slowly encroaching on the city as a result of rising sea levels, with some areas, such as Brownwood in Baytown, now submerged. In Lakewood's current stage design, the rock and water feature has been replaced with a dazzling array of lights against a dark background conjuring the cosmos. Above the Sanctuary coloured

lights shift through the ‘clouds’ of the wire mesh screens. Rakow details how the lighting in the Sanctuary is designed to move through various stages of daylight, with bright light giving the impression of sunlight. As Osteen takes to the stage again after the darkened space of the worship phase to deliver his message, the daylight is slowly dialled up and the sky-blue LED curtain moves back into place as the cloud ceiling is illuminated in sky-blue. In the previous design, the blue skies and white clouds would reappear behind the choir sections.³⁶⁶ Rakow writes that the effect is of a sunrise after a dark night, echoing Osteen’s ‘message of hope.’ She writes that by: ‘literally moving through the darkness, believers are reminded of Christ’s saving work through lyrical, visual, tonal, and emotional cues.’³⁶⁷



Fig. 25. Houston skyline from the freeway, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

This idealised, hyperreal version of clear blue skies is a comforting imaginary within Houston’s polluted subtropical climate. The heat has produced a city of ubiquitous air conditioning, necessitated by high summer temperatures (a record of 43 degrees has been recorded at Bush Intercontinental Airport in 2000 and 2011). However, the air conditioning increases the exterior temperature, driving annual records up, by shifting hot air back out into the smoggy atmosphere. The air is thick with a heady chemical mix including benzene, particulates and formaldehyde, pumped out by the industries along the shipping channel. Texas produces the most greenhouse gases into the atmosphere compared with every other US state, and, if taken as a country, would be the seventh largest producer of emissions globally. To counteract its’ reputation as a city founded on the fossil

³⁶⁶ Rakow, ‘The Light of the World,’ 94.

³⁶⁷ Rakow, ‘The Light of the World,’ 101.

fuel industry, the current mayor (2021) Sylvester Turner is attempting to make Houston an exemplar in the transition to a low carbon future. Since July 2020 100% renewable energy powers Houston’s airports and other facilities, and overall uses more renewables than any other American city. The oil and gas industry in America is, however, still increasing fossil fuel production.³⁶⁸ The International Energy Agency advises an immediate cessation. In Houston, greenhouse gases have been reduced 37% since 2005,³⁶⁹ but there is still some way to go to reach carbon neutrality. 8.7 million people die every year as a direct result of air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels,³⁷⁰ disproportionately affecting Black communities and those with lower incomes.³⁷¹

On the high definition screens during worship and on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, filtered backgrounds of water, arctic mountaintops, trees, sunsets, hills and stars are interspersed with contemporary looking abstract graphics. On social media these backgrounds are overlaid with short, memorable phrases encouraging the believer that God will help them achieve their dreams. Natural metaphors are used repeatedly in song lyrics: ‘River rich in mercy beckon... Rivers in the desert, Clouds are forming, Celebrate this free out-pouring,’³⁷² ‘You are, the Son of God, You are, the Solid Rock,’³⁷³ ‘Let me be an instrument, To exalt and to extend, Jesus name globally, As the waters cover the sea.’³⁷⁴ In Osteen’s messages and books, anecdotes of people’s lives and

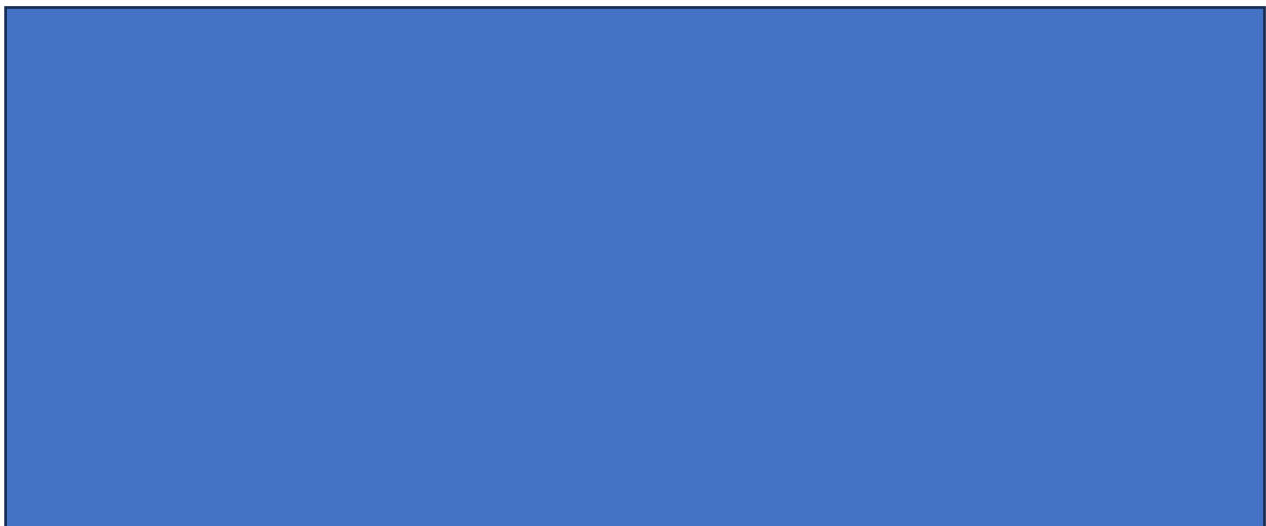


Fig. 26. Material removed due to copyright. (Joel Osteen Instagram stories: ‘When you speak victory,’ 2nd April 2022; ‘You don’t have to chase the blessings,’ 28th May 2022; ‘Rise up and go after your dreams,’ 13th May 2022; ‘There is promotion in every problem,’ 29th January 2022, available at: <https://www.instagram.com/joelosteen/?hl=en>).

³⁶⁸ Omella Kaze, ‘EIA Expects U.S. Fossil Fuel Production to Reach New Highs in 2023,’ U.S. Energy Information Administration, accessed 14 July 2022, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=50978>.

³⁶⁹ Akiko Fujita, ‘We need ‘to move the energy sector forward’: Houston mayor on tackling climate change’ Yahoo! Finance, accessed 21st January 2022, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/we-need-to-move-the-energy-sector-forward-houston-mayor-on-tackling-climate-change-130620589.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xLLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAJLnB-qj6Ndw0wq63y7jrNtnT-0eZWGx-kyZ3s2q18eFRFiKOLQENTmbTCZQUOTF0XQluMWGYjNcKTIbF4hu8T3zExLY1dHFA3NnsadqbnSIGD1ns_coojIpmcSz5M_Yb5rvvewLxuyddDa3nVyELRoe4gEkrADg2QXx3unFbKE&gucounter=2.

³⁷⁰ Oliver Milman, ‘“Invisible killer”: fossil fuels caused 8.7m deaths globally in 2018, research finds’, The Guardian, accessed: 6th December 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/feb/09/fossil-fuels-pollution-deaths-research>.

³⁷¹ ‘Disparities in the Impact of Air Pollution,’ American Lung Association, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/disparities>.

³⁷² Israel Houghton & Mark Townsend, ‘Free For All,’ 2006, Track #8, *Cover the Earth*, Integrity Music, 2006.

³⁷³ Israel Houghton, ‘All About You,’ 2008, Track #2, *Better Than Life: The Best of Lakenood Live*, Integrity Music, 2008.

³⁷⁴ Israel Houghton, Meleasa Houghton And Cindy Cruse Ratcliff, ‘Cover the Earth,’ 2006, Track #1, *Cover the Earth*, Integrity Music, 2006.

struggles and stories of his family from past and present are occasionally interspersed with metaphors of Redwood forests as a Godly community,³⁷⁵ the power of being planted in good soil,³⁷⁶ our lives as a temporary mist or vapour,³⁷⁷ of the laws of the universe as a demonstration of God's order³⁷⁸ but these are all instrumentalised towards his teleological and therapeutic message of: 'You are... a child of the Most High God. He... has great things in store for you. Be bold and claim what belongs to you.'³⁷⁹

Elemental symbols of light, water, rock, sky and wind/ breath materialise in the site, and are instrumentalised to embed a set of beliefs, suggesting Lakewood's originary and universal significance. The globe and cosmological imagery also communicate a world-founding and world-dominating truth. Technology and design render idealised, artificial versions of organic realities. Behind the spectacular forms conjured by narrative texts, a divine, benevolent presence waiting to deliver us from the troubles of this life is imagined. These varied representations suggest a backgrounded nature, a passive backdrop to divine activity, a presence that is greater than His creation. The more-than-human world is imagined only as a resource or a vessel to communicate the glory of a transcendent God. Osteen states: 'He's not moved by the natural, he's supernatural.'³⁸⁰ In this imaginary God is all powerful, able to work to His own rules, unconstrained by the material conditions that govern us, and able to intervene in the world if we ask Him in accordance with His will (which often looks a lot like our own).

At Lakewood, there is no neat separation between inside and out, despite imaginaries of belonging and exclusion. Containment within both the structure of the building and the community of belief is experienced as security and protection, as being bound to a religious habitus. The self is imagined as a vessel for potential transformations, oriented toward a story-world founded on and conveyed through an ecological mimicry of idealised forms, surrounded by the mega vessel of the church and its global crowd. Robles-Anderson writes:

'spectacular Protestantism provides an opportunity to understand the migration of a cosmology into new material conditions... materials, aesthetics, and practices help believers confirm a mythic worldview. Through acts of congregation, believers take the logics of mediation to be confirmations of the sacred dimensions in everyday life.'³⁸¹

From this place of stability and certainty, the believer's gaze is continually directed upwards to a transcendent God 'on high,' reachable through an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ coming 'down to earth,' when He reappears in the clouds in Lakewood's eschatological imaginary. Lakewood's visual, material and spatial culture forms a total work of art. This creates both a literal and imagined separation of the site from its ecological context, cut off by its concrete and glass box, alienating the crowd from their bodies which are enmeshed and

³⁷⁵ Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church Message, 23rd April 2017, no longer available online.

³⁷⁶ 'Joel Osteen - The Power of the Soil,' Joel Osteen Channel, YouTube, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyUJwx4syY>.

³⁷⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 285.

³⁷⁸ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 223.

³⁷⁹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, 93.

³⁸⁰ Joel Osteen, @lakewoodchurch, 'Don't put your human limitations on the God who spoke worlds into existence,' Instagram video post, 6th May 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CdOou5Wpf4Q/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.

³⁸¹ Robles-Anderson, 'The Crystal Cathedral,' 599.

dependent upon increasingly volatile ecological conditions. However, contrary to the imaginary, the climate is brought into the space of the Sanctuary by the weathering bodies that worship there, a climate that exists both within and outside of those bodies, a climate that is shaped and intensified by the atmospherics of the narrative texts within Lakewood.

Chapter Three: Affective Atmospheres in a Climate of Belief

September, 2001, Sheffield. I am twenty-five years old. I am praying at an emergency meeting at my church and I am crying. I cry with the shock and dismay of my comfortable, White, Western world being breached by something incomprehensible. It cannot be recuperated with words. It cannot be digested. Earlier in the day I had stood in front of a small TV set, watching, transfixed, as the twin towers of the World Trade Centre burned. I watch the South Tower collapse into a vast spread of rubble, dust and bodies, followed by North Tower. Several months earlier I had stood at the base of these buildings and photographed them for an exhibition called 'Pneuma,' the Latin word for breath, spirit or air in motion. For the first time I feel my previously rock solid faith shift the tiniest fraction. As we pray for America, the binary, black and white text of evangelicalism begins to unravel within me.

2019. I am forty-four years old. Tears sting at the back of my eyelids and if I don't let them out they will burst through the pores in my cheeks. I am standing and singing with the crowd in the dark bowl of the Sanctuary. The air is chilled, but the atmosphere is an upsurge of intense feeling which overwhelms me. The heavy thud of the base is vibrating through the floor and up through my legs into my chest. I am convicted by a dawning realisation that I have come home, that here, with the believers, is where I belong. Regret and relief mingle sharply in my throat, I never should have left. The lights above me shine through a vast undulating expanse of wire mesh, hung from the ceiling to resemble a magnificent sky. They soften from deep red to orange and now to pale yellow. We sing that the God of breakthrough is on our side. I am helpless to resist, the truth of what I am encountering is blooming somewhere deep in my chest. Sixteen white spotlights search across the sea of bodies. The 250 singers in the choir stalls sway rhythmically from side to side. This narrative may not make complete sense in my head yet, but it makes sense in the core of me, this is who I am, I am lost without it. This revelation stirs within me. Below me, within the crowd, a man dances wildly, waving his shirt in circles above his head. Other congregants clap and cheer and holler. I join with ten thousand believers to sing: 'Let faith be the song that overcomes the raging sea, let faith be the song that calms the storm inside of me'. The bass booms, the volume is colossal. The lyrics rhythmically imprint into the open space surrounding us, repeatedly telling us that we are not alone, that we will overcome our troubles. The atmosphere arises from the bodies in the crowd, almost palpably into the air. Thousands of people stretch out their hands or hold them open to receive the love and warmth that is so tangibly here. The atmosphere is one of an upward movement, a heightening focus of attention onto the Holy Spirit, that unseen but deeply felt presence of God that seems to materialise in the room, hovering around us. This presence is a charged cloud, it moves us in waves of emotion. Despite myself, I am immersed in a bowl of affect.

Through narrative we order and reorder, make and remake the world. Narrative, perceived by the sensing body, shapes our cultural, political, and ecological domains. The evangelical drive to convert the world, bringing everyone into the encircling bounds of the church through the communication of a story that stabilizes and authorizes, is narrated within Lakewood as a story of health, wealth, victory and ultimately rescue. Gifted, charismatic speakers powerfully convey Lakewood's story. Narrative texts and vocalisation work in concert to embed the story in the bodies of believers, producing affective atmospheres and creating imaginaries within the total artwork of the Sanctuary. This produces a climate of belief in which these atmospheres cannot be separated from the meteorological climate and the weathering bodies that worship in the site.

Returning to Bal's conceptualisation of narrative, story and fabula, she defines and describes the fabula as producing the chronological elements of the story, the story's ordering of events, its actors, but also its colouring, its inflection.³⁸² These elements are arranged in a certain way to: 'produce the effect desired: be this convincing, moving, disgusting, or aesthetic.'³⁸³ Within American evangelicalism and at Lakewood, the fabula is produced through the narration of creation-fall-redemption-recreation, toward the apocalypse and creation of a new heaven and earth. This is the end point to which the church looks, producing awe, fear and excitement. The fabula is the interpretation, the mental activity and 'the memory trace' of the reader who encounters the story through its narration, forming an: 'imaginative world.'³⁸⁴

Firstly, Bal's 'fabula' of the story can be expanded in relation to the broader, philosophical discourse on fabulation. Importantly, this discourse foregrounds the possibility of being, imagining or believing otherwise. Both James Burton and Donald Bogue, for example, draw on Henry Bergson's deployment of the term fabulation in relation to belief in his 1932 text *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.³⁸⁵ Bergson, the first to use fabulation in a philosophical sense, posits the term in relation to 'phantasmatic representations,'³⁸⁶ the ascribing of agency to natural phenomena within religious closed societies with a defined sense of inside and out. These fabulations produce powerfully vivid fictions that modify behaviour and action but also work to reinforce social cohesion.³⁸⁷ For Bergson, fabulation is viewed largely in negative terms, intensifying power structures, but recent scholarship is re-examining the concept. Burton draws Bergson's theory of fabulation and the image or suggestion of the transcendent within it to consider the alternative worlds of science fiction, its potential to destabilise the boundaries between real and fictional worlds offering moments of immanent salvation.³⁸⁸ Bogue links Bergson's concept of fabulation to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's understand of fabulation as a 'visionary faculty' that creates 'effective presences.'³⁸⁹ For Deleuze and Guattari, fabulation is a form of 'legending,' creating hallucinatory visions of future collectives and a people to come.³⁹⁰ Lastly, Sadiya Hartman deploys the term to produce a method of writing she terms 'Critical Fabulation,'³⁹¹ which enables her

³⁸² Bal, *Narratology*, 5.

³⁸³ Bal, *Narratology*, 8.

³⁸⁴ Bal, *Narratology*, 6.

³⁸⁵ Henry Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, [1935] 1954).

³⁸⁶ Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 108.

³⁸⁷ Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 109.

³⁸⁸ James Burton, *The Philosophy of Science Fiction: Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

³⁸⁹ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

³⁹⁰ Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History*, 15-19.

³⁹¹ Sadiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14. muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

to write with and against ‘what cannot be represented’ in the black historical archive, to imagine what ‘cannot be verified.’ This method, for Hartman, ‘bears a relation to a liberated future.’³⁹² Whilst this is not an exhaustive survey of the discourse, it points to how an understanding of fabulation might be applied to the imaginaries at Lakewood both in Bergsonian terms, creating a sense of shared order and reinforcing power structures, but also containing within it a possibility to imagine otherwise, to destabilise the repetitions and exclusions of the overarching story-world.

Bal’s concept of ‘fabula’ as the colouring or inflection of a story and also fabulation as an opening of possibility, might be applied to performative narration. I explore the charismatic narration of the preacher as a ‘performative ontology’ which contributes to an atmospheric fabula within Lakewood. Specifically how Lakewood’s therapeutic and teleological narrative is inflected with its speaking, its performative and embodied communication, creating an imaginative world. I consider here how Lakewood’s adherence to the Word of Faith movement utilises performative language, which I link to J.L. Austin’s ‘speech acts,’ to transform the material world. The future orientation of the language of this movement reflects the teleology of Lakewood’s sky-bound gaze and exclusion of a more-than-human world, but also opens other, more heterodox possibilities.

Secondly, Bal’s definition of ‘fabula’ can be applied to the narratee, the reception by the embodied ‘reader’ at Lakewood (the congregant who perceives and interprets the narrative texts of the church). Within the total artwork of the worship service, immersive vocalisation, music, and lighting are all rhythmic strategies that produce a pleasurable immediacy, deep embodied affect, experienced as an encounter with the divine, an encounter that believers want to return to again and again. For Stevenson embodied rituals and practices arise from, but also generate and sustain ongoing religious belief, promoting ‘affective piety.’³⁹³ Watching singers and other congregants move, dance and express emotion promotes repetition, mimesis and entrainment. The volume of music vibrates through the floor up into worshippers so that the rhythm is felt, inescapably, in the body. Song lyrics and preaching focus on the ‘I’ and the individual as the site for an interior encounter. Being born-again is repeated in each affective experience, reinforcing the bodily basis of belief, keeping spiritual fervour alive.³⁹⁴ This embodied encounter during the worship service, whilst felt individually, contributes to a collective atmosphere.

I refer to this atmosphere as a ‘climate of belief’ within the Sanctuary, a climate that is felt and transmitted between bodies, produced by and sustaining Lakewood’s imaginaries. The meteorological climate, its’ storms, floods and the un/stable ground it produces, is represented in hyperreal ways. I consider what is at stake when believing bodies experience both real and imagined weathers, what implications this atmosphere might have in relation to the future of Lakewood and Houston as a location threatened by climate crisis. I place this within the context of eschatology, an obsession with End Times theology within the evangelical movement creating an ambivalent attitude toward the environment and climate.

³⁹² Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12-13.

³⁹³ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 15.

³⁹⁴ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 44-45.

At Lakewood, the narrative texts within the site are perceived by bodies that are variously open to the transmission of belief. The texts are internalised, create affective response and are reproduced through performative acts that embed belief. As the Lakewood story is perceived via sensory experience, sound waves in the air combine with visual and haptic stimuli, and within the body of the congregant a version of reality is (re)created. Specifically, the Lakewood story, founded on beliefs and practices of the divine power of vocalisation by both leaders and congregants produces not only a sense of a grounding belonging, but the more fluid sensations of affective atmospheres. Language is not as an arbitrary system of signs, abstracted from the material world, but in its vocalisation becomes a shifting, fluid force field issuing forth from animate bodies enmeshed in a dynamic interplay with material reality. Philosopher David Abram outlines the basis of language as expressive, affective and deeply rooted in the body. Abram writes:

The gesture [of language] is spontaneous and immediate. It is not an arbitrary sign that we mentally attach to a particular emotion or feeling; rather, the gesture *is* the bodying-forth of that emotion into the world, it *is* that feeling of delight or anguish in its tangible, visible aspect...Communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective.³⁹⁶

John Osteen's historical involvement with the Pentecostal and subsequently the Word of Faith movement has produced an imaginary at Lakewood of the power of communicative vocalisation. In the Word of Faith movement, the liminal space of the mouth is a powerful portal for materialising belief, the words summoned from within and propelled to the outside across this bodily threshold. Vocalised faith-filled words become the bearer of new worlds. A miracle forms in the mouth.³⁹⁷ Believers do not only have access to the way things are but also the way things will be: to speak the words is to summon new realities. The speaking of creation into being in Genesis ('In the beginning was the Word') is understood as the original demonstration of the creative power of the word.

Joel Osteen extends the Word of Faith into current teaching at Lakewood, although he has rendered the controversial elements more palatable to reach a wider audience.³⁹⁸ In his 2007 bestselling book 'Become a Better You' Joel Osteen writes: 'words are like seeds. They have creative power. It says in Isaiah that 'We will eat the fruit of our words.' That's amazing when you stop to consider the truth: Our words tend to produce what we are saying.'³⁹⁹ The world is viewed as alive with the possibility of word-things that are predestined to appear when spoken out. This complex relation to materiality arises not only from the Biblical precedence of speech as both divine and powerful, but also the idea that the world can be bent to God's will through faith-filled speech, through a transmission of divine power, blessing the faith-filled speaker. By aligning with Osteen's

³⁹⁵ Title of a book by John Osteen, *There is a Miracle in Your Mouth*, (Houston: John H. Osteen Publications, 1972).

³⁹⁶ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 74.

³⁹⁷ 'There is a Miracle in Your Mouth' is the title of a 1972 book by John Osteen. *There is A Miracle in Your Mouth* (Houston, Texas: John Osteen Publications, 1972).

³⁹⁸ Miller and Carlin, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,' 33.

³⁹⁹ Sinitiere, *Salvation With a Smile*, 83.

positive confession and agreeing with this authorising narrative, believers tread a path of guaranteed success towards wellbeing, wealth and fulfilling relationships, already promised by God. Believers need only to step into the new reality with their words. At Lakewood, the belief they make new worlds with their words forms a powerful charge within the imaginary. Osteen exhorted the Lakewood congregation in a sermon series on the power of words to impact on the present and future in 2001: ‘You are who you are today in large part because of the words that you’ve been speaking... You’ve got to begin to see yourselves as the overcomers God made you to be.’⁴⁰⁰

On visiting the church in July 2019, I heard one of the many iterative performances of this belief in a message titled ‘Call It In’: the power of words to affect positive material change. Osteen retells the Lakewood narrative - to look for divine blessing, opportunity, to expect the miraculous and to step into it in faith: ‘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.’ He wants us to be financially blessed, to have breakthrough, to be healthy and to align with God’s desire for our lives. Through using a rhetorical repetition of the same persuasive phrases over and over again he embeds these truths in the bodies of believers.

Bowler traces the impact of E.W. Kenyon, revivalist, evangelist and educator on the emergence of the prosperity movement.⁴⁰¹ Kenyon framed New Thought (a group of ideas that foregrounded the power of the mind to enact positive change, emphasising the potential of humankind to shape their own reality) as a set of universal spiritual laws enabling humans to reach their full potential. Salvation wasn’t just a discrete moment in time where God acted upon the individual, but an ongoing process whereby the individual became all that they were destined to be through ordering their thoughts toward God as a kind of mental power or positive thinking.⁴⁰² Kenyon believed that ‘faith-filled words’ existed as an invisible untapped potential governing the world, bringing material reality into being.⁴⁰³ He believed that God wanted above all to have speakers, not just believers. In his theology the body of the believer was a channel through which divine positive energy might flow, enacting the binding legal authority of Jesus’s statement: ‘If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it’ (John 14:14). Bowler writes that for Kenyon: ‘Christ’s substitutionary atonement...underwrote a series of

⁴⁰⁰ Sinitiere, *Salvation With a Smile*, 83, 252.

⁴⁰¹ Bowler tracks the developments in the Pentecostal prosperity gospel and the ecumenical impact of religious revivals in the late 1960s and 1970s into the rise of the non-denominational megachurch. It was within this period of religious growth and change that John Osteen’s Pentecostal church grew to become one of the nation’s key sites for the propagation of the prosperity gospel, gaining national recognition through television and radio broadcasting of services. Osteen was also a member of the influential Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International, a global organisation of Christian businessmen arising from the Pentecostal movement. The Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International, founded in 1952, is a global Christian organisation with chapters in 85 countries. See more here: <http://www.fgbmfi.org.uk/> N.B. It is interesting to note that the logo of Lakewood is a simplification of FGBMI’s logo design, which also contains both a flame and a simple dove shape of three lines. Bowler traces the impact of E.W. Kenyon, revivalist, evangelist and educator on the emergence of the prosperity movement. She frame it as a product of three intersecting threads: Pentecostalism; New Thought (emerged in the 1880s as a group of ideas that foregrounded the power of the mind to enact positive change, emphasising the potential of humankind to shape their own reality) and ‘an American gospel of pragmatism, individualism and upward mobility.’ (Bowler, *Blessed*, 11). Bowler writes that for Pentecostals: ‘The absolutism that charged their doctrine with certainty and their actions with cosmic meaning also fixed words with iron-clad import. These Pentecostals relied on prevailing power to transmit their pleas not as requests but as contracts, guaranteeing miraculous results.’ (Bowler, *Blessed*, 25).

⁴⁰² Bowler, *Blessed*, 14.

⁴⁰³ Bowler, *Blessed*, 15-19.

spiritual and legal transactions.⁴⁰⁴ Kenyon described it as the ‘Power of Attorney’: for believers this became the transactional power that healed the sick, cast out demons and enabled the speaking of tongues.⁴⁰⁵

Several decades later, philosopher J.L. Austin was penning a secular metaphysics of language that would later form his series ‘How to do Things with Words’ for the William James Lectures at the Harvard Institute in 1955. Austin’s description of the explicit performative utterance mirrors the ‘Power of Attorney’ conception of faith filled speech as adhered to by Kenyon. His examples of saying ‘I bet you...,’ of saying ‘I do’ during a marriage ceremony, of saying ‘I name this ship...’ is to action something in material reality - to say it is to make it so.⁴⁰⁶ These utterances, or ‘performatives,’ rather than being statements or descriptions with any truth value, effect a change in reality when spoken within the correct context or necessary circumstances.⁴⁰⁷ The term can be narrowed further into contractual speech (e.g. I bet) or declaratory speech (e.g. I declare war) or broadened to ‘operative’ speech as is used within legal terminology. Performatives, or as Austin later designated them, ‘speech acts,’ convey how language materialises in the world.

Language as performative might also be linked to questions of identity, how we materialise or enact ourselves in relation to others. Judith Butler’s concept of ‘Performative Acts’⁴⁰⁸ sets out that identity (specifically for Butler, the gendered self) does not exist prior to ‘acts’ or ‘acting,’ instead, performative repetitions are instrumental in constructing the illusion of, or belief in, a stable sense of self. This stability might be thought of in relation to a sense of orientation. We perform in order to orient ourselves toward or align with an identity. For Butler, actors ‘come to believe and perform in the mode of belief.’⁴⁰⁹ These performative actions do not sit in contrast with or apart from reality, but, like Berger’s world-founding social conversation, constitute a new kind of reality. Actors don’t pre-exist the stage but are always on stage, becoming their gender through: ‘a series of acts that are renewed, revised and consolidated over time.’⁴¹⁰ Butler writes that: ‘The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic...the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities.’⁴¹¹ Although Butler’s discussion is situated within gender theory, it illuminates the ways in which identity is constructed within individual and collective bodies of belief at Lakewood. Repetitive performative acts orient the individual, aligning them with the identity of believer, a believer with access to divine power. Collective performative acts institute and sustain the identity of the church, through which the believer can access this power. At Lakewood, as with other evangelical megachurches, the social conventions regulate the

⁴⁰⁴ Bowler, *Blessed*, 17.

⁴⁰⁵ Bowler, *Blessed*, 20.

⁴⁰⁶ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 5.

⁴⁰⁷ Austin points out that within the use of evidence in the American legal system, to say something that is performative is admissible as evidence, because it is considered the same as doing something, whereas just speaking in general cannot be submitted as evidence, as it is merely hear-say. (J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 13).

⁴⁰⁸ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.

⁴⁰⁹ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 520.

⁴¹⁰ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 523.

⁴¹¹ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 521.

individual to comply with the performance of belief. If believing bodies within the community fail to comply, it is impossible to exist within the community, and exclusion follows.

An imaginary of the power of the performative faith-filled utterance within Lakewood, like Austin's 'speech acts,' develops from Kenyon's influence on the Word of Faith movement and its' conflation of material acquisition with divine blessing. Key to the Word of Faith movement is: 'affirmative repetition, visualisation, imagination, mood direction, and voiced scripture as prayerful habits.'⁴¹² These performative acts enact a future transformation, renewing and consolidating the identity of believer with each declaration. As with Austin's



Fig. 27. Joel Osteen preaching, Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

⁴¹² Bowler, *Blessed*, 59.

‘speech acts,’ religious language here takes on a similarly contractual significance in its’ definitive, legalistic nature, departing from arguably less fixed types of religious declaration such as intercession, confession, and praise. It is ‘mechanistic,’⁴¹³ a bargain struck, a transaction of power, imitating the broader context of exchange within free-market capitalism, an example of how language (here the language of belief) is co-opted by dominant ideological forms. Performative vocalisation shapes reality to the act. Even if the blessings don’t appear to arrive, the believer lives as though they will, acting the belief out, drawing reality into the orbit of what is imagined.

Within the Word of Faith movement, language is both fixed and mutable. Its solidity arises from the transactional certainty that to speak is to bring about a change in reality. There is no openness to doubt or interpretation. In this conception of religious speech any delay in the materialization of the blessing is conceived of as God testing the limits of the believer’s faith to bring them to maturity – believers are encouraged to wait actively in faith, trusting, knowing that the blessing is coming. It relates to chronological time: this leads to that, faith plus speech produces reality. In a 2004 series ‘Life-Changing Words’ Osteen declared: ‘You can change your world by changing your words... Quit prophesying defeat, quit prophesying lack, quit prophesying mediocrity.’⁴¹⁴ In a later book *It’s Your Time* (2009) he states: ‘Our words truly do have creative power... Change your words. Change your life... Your words prophesy what you become.’⁴¹⁵ Language within the Word of Faith movement is also suffused with an electric, embodied thrill of possibility. It forms a potent moment in time, a collapsing of temporality – a drawing in of the future, especially the victorious end point of creation remade at Jesus’ return – into the present moment, into the body that speaks wholeness, healing, forgiveness, blessing, reward and victory. This forms a: ‘realized eschatology,’ bringing salvation into the now.⁴¹⁶ It effects both the body of the believer in the moment of speaking, and the reality they move (forward/ upward) into, narrowing potential futures into a desire line, making the outcome seem inevitable. In this sense it both constitutes and reflects the linear teleological movement, the sky-bound orientation of Lakewood toward the end of the world, but also the fluidity, the excessive possibility of the embodied spirituality of the Pentecostal.

At Lakewood, belief and speech mingle in mutually reinforcing performances. The Osteen family are consummate tellers, steeped in a performative ontology that extends from the religious movements of the great awakenings and tent revivals through into Pentecostalism. The communication of a heartfelt message, speaking the world as it truly is and also claiming it as it might be, is key. This is evidenced in John Osteen’s powerful live preaching and televangelism ministries and his international missionary work. Joel Osteen studied radio and TV communications at Oral Roberts University before taking over his father’s TV ministry and eventually the mantle of the preacher. Family members Dodie (widower of founder John), Paul and Lisa Osteen all regularly contribute to public speaking at the church. Joel Osteen’s children Alexandra and Jonathon both studied

⁴¹³ Bowler, *Blessed*, 87.

⁴¹⁴ Sinitiere, *Salvation With a Smile*, 83.

⁴¹⁵ Sinitiere, *Salvation With a Smile*, 83.

⁴¹⁶ Miller and Carlin, ‘Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,’ 34.

communications at University and now play active roles in both music ministry and preaching. John Osteen's children and grandchildren have grown up watching the power of performative narration on a weekly basis in the affect produced in the bodies of those surrounding them in the congregation, and in the changing orientations and trajectories of believer's lives.

During his message 'Call It In,' 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 clapping, murmuring approval, calling out the agreement of an 'amen.' His gestures are precise, they seem natural but are rehearsed and repeated. Osteen's advice has a veneer of logic, but it is the emotional charge that arrests. His voice rises and falls, summoned from an embodied will to communicate. Towards the end of his preach his 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.



Fig. 28. Material removed due to copyright. (Image of crowd taken from stage, Lakewood Church website, 2020, available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/>)

Political theorist William E. Connolly lists evangelical preachers amongst a range of professions (including corporate advertisers, Catholic priests, anthropologists and filmmakers) that are attuned to the linguistic and sensory inter-involvements that flow into the tone and colour of perception. Connolly highlights the importance of recognising the multiplicity of the interconnectedness of language – how it is formed, perceived and felt in the sensing body. The circuits of inter-involvement are: 'imbrications between embodiment,

language, disposition, perception, and mood.⁴¹⁷ For Connolly, language and the senses are enfolded and exceed each other in experience.⁴¹⁸ Of the kind of belief that arises from and produces embodied affect, Connolly writes:

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.⁴¹⁹

Belief moves from the fluidity of affect into the fixity of enduring, repeated performances of identity. This level of belief becomes a deep rooted part of who we are, remaining unaltered by new evidence and resisting transformation by rationality or reflection. The performative utterance of the preacher enlivens the constructed material, visual and auditory world of the megachurch, creating a liquid sensation of possibility, of sanctified magic. Popular evangelists knowingly deploy the performative power of their speaking to create affect in the bodies of their congregants, affect that embeds the narrative and engenders belief. Revivalist Charles Finney, in



Fig. 29. Phil Munsey, 'Practice Makes Imperfect', Lakewood Church, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

⁴¹⁷ William E. Connolly, 'Materialities of Experience,' in Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham [NC] ; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 183.

⁴¹⁸ Connolly, 'Materialities of Experience,' 182.

⁴¹⁹ Connolly, 'Materialities of Experience,' 196.

his 'Lectures on Revivals of Religion' (1835) advised evangelists to learn the skill of conveying sentiment from actors.⁴²⁰ He wrote: 'mere words will never express the full meaning of the gospel...The *manner* of saying it is almost everything.'⁴²¹

Gernot Böhme points to the importance of the 'resonance' of voice, a kind of friction or reverberation in the production of affect between bodies. Drawing on the teachings of philosopher and mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) to highlight the intersubjective and affective impact of the voice, he writes that: 'in Böhme's theory of understanding, we understand an utterance when it strikes our *inner bell*. That means that understanding is a co-vibration, a resonance.'⁴²² This co-vibrational aspect of the spoken word produces feeling and carries meaning. Referring to Roland Barthes' 'Grain of the Voice,' (1977) Böhme writes of the affective qualities of the spoken voice and its' ability to produce an atmosphere: 'a voice is the atmospheric presence of something or someone and one of the dimensions along which something or someone steps out of it-, him- or herself and essentially tinges the surrounding atmosphere with emotion.'⁴²³ A voice creates a resonant friction, a reverberation in the space between people and within the listener, creating and transmitting affect. During emotive preaching, singing and collective vocalisations of faith, this reverberation is felt initially in the skin, as goose bumps form and hairs raise with a tingling sensation. This touching of sound on body then travels through the skin into the bodily interior. Tears moisten eyes and a weight forms in the chest as thoughts are directed to align with the sound, the source of the affect. But within Lakewood's hierarchies, the believer is almost always on the receiving end of someone else's voice – the patriarchal and authoritative voice of the White, privileged man as a stand in for the voice of God.

Nancy conceives of the teller of the myth as driven by a purely affective desire to communicate. It is the communication itself that is communicated. It is tautegorical, it communicates nothing but the will to communicate: 'Communicating itself, it brings into being what it says, it founds its fiction. This efficacious self-communication is will – and will is subjectivity presented (representing itself) as a remainderless totality.'⁴²⁴ Nancy's framing of the teller of the myth echoes Adorno's critique of Wagner, where affective force of communication itself occludes the listeners ability to critically perceive the content of what is being communicated. The Evangelical preachers voice, signaling a pure authenticity, combines with the re-iteration of the mythic story. This totalising voice produces an impelling affect in the body of the believer and forms 'an absolute community,' at least for the duration of the performance. Nancy writes that:

Myth is above all full, original speech, at times revealing, at times founding the intimate being of a community...This speech is not a discourse that would come in response to the inquisitive mind: it comes in response to a waiting rather than to a question, and to a waiting on the part of the world itself. In myth the world makes itself known, and it makes itself known through declaration or through a complete and decisive revelation.⁴²⁵

⁴²⁰ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 24.

⁴²¹ Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 28.

⁴²² Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 123.

⁴²³ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 140.

⁴²⁴ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 57.

⁴²⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 48.

Nancy frames mythic speech as arising from something inherent to being in the world that waits to be addressed. He writes that mythic speech is: ‘... a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it, a religio whose utterances would be “great speech” (*grand parler*).’⁴²⁶ The utterance of speech carries the mythic narrative through the medium of the voice: the cadence, volume and pitch. For Böhme, the voice is a: ‘stronger generator of atmospheres than most other phenomena.’⁴²⁷ Joel Osteen’s voice and the voices of musicians on stage produce a resonance felt both inside those who vocalise and inside the listeners in the crowd. Emotions swell and flow across bodies, creating what seems to be a tangible atmosphere as bodily sensation is shared.

In the megachurch, theatricality, vocal expression and faith combine. Whatever their belief outside of the moment of utterance, believers fully embody belief in the moment of speech, speech is the outworking and stabilising of a potentially shaky belief, hence the need to speak, and to speak regularly and repetitively to banish doubt.⁴²⁸ Reperforming the identity of believer constructs a stable sense of self. Likewise, through the collectivity of the song, voices work rhythmically and affectively to declare faith in unison. Song lyrics at Lakewood, pointing to the method of vocalising away the doubt, state: ‘Sing a little louder than the unbelief... my weapon is a melody.’ Whether speaking or singing, vocalisation and faith come together, are one and the same.

Affective Atmospheres and the Dis/Believing Body

In Richard Schechner’s theory of performance he outlines the differences and points of contact between performances of entertainment (which relate to theatrical space) and performances of efficacy (which are ritualistic and transformational).⁴²⁹ In performances of entertainment, the spectator is transported into a performative space for a limited duration and subsequently returned to the ordinary world, producing a minimal change in the life of the audience, who are constituted as separate individuals. In the performance of efficacy, the subject is more permanently marked or changed, for example in the change of identity enacted through a baptism. Audiences belong to spaces of entertainment, whilst participants and congregations belong to spaces of efficacy. Whilst both the transportation of entertainment and transformation of efficacy overlap and are present in all performances, the imprint left as part of the efficacious aspect of any performance on the performer and participant is, according to Schechner, ‘laden with power’ and has the potential to ‘bind a person to his community; anchor him to an identity,’⁴³⁰ echoing Nancy’s assertion that myth binds communities to the world. Arguably, these aspects of community, identity and power run through all forms of performance, whether entertaining or efficacious and the space of the Sanctuary produces both transportation and transformation as modes through which identification with a community are transmitted.

⁴²⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 49.

⁴²⁷ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 141.

⁴²⁸ Jonathan David Helser & Melissa Helser, ‘Raise a Hallelujah,’ 2019, Track #1, *Victory*, Bethel Music, 2019.

⁴²⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, New ed, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2005), 156-157.

⁴³⁰ Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 131

Joel Osteen's disarming familiarity and smoothness of delivery, the 'total artwork' of the Sanctuary including the dazzling lighting, imagery and professional stage show and musicians all combine into what appears as entertainment, and yet, it is still a religious ritual too. As the story is told during the service, the believer is temporarily transported to a spectacular and emotive space where affective atmospheres impact on embodied sensation and cognition. A more permanent transformation also occurs as the congregant becomes cemented into their identity as believer through participation in: 'exercises, visualisations, affirmations, prayers, and questions.'⁴³¹ This occurs particularly in the profusion of faith-filled words: the collective statement of faith at the start of every service, in declarative 'word of faith' statements and prayers, song lyrics, and testimony. The believer effects their own performative transformation in their speaking, channelling proclaimed realities into being. These performative transformations take place not only on an individual level but collectively, enacting a group identity of belonging in the church. Vocalisation however, is only one of a range of repetitious actions and gestures. Participation through dancing, stances and gestures of openness and upward orientation (for example holding arms or hands aloft), smiling and physically aligning and mirroring produces affect which works to transmit and embed belief.

This performative transformation might be linked to how narrative texts within megachurches, for Stevenson, function as an 'evangelical dramaturgy' to embed belief through bodily repetitions. These texts (Stevenson terms them 'genres') 'confront users with vivid, sensual, and rhythmic experiences designed to foster embodied beliefs that respond to specific devotional needs and priorities.'⁴³² These texts function when an openness to or expectation of belief exists, but they can also simultaneously generate and reinforce belief,⁴³³ directing people: 'toward/ into certain emotional responses and ideologies.'⁴³⁴ For Stevenson, affect doesn't mean a lack of meaning or signification, but affective forces carry ideological content, and are 'strategically deployed,'⁴³⁵ within evangelical dramaturgy. Evangelical dramaturgy is: 'a system of performative tactics designed to manipulate the physical, rhythmic encounter between user and medium.'⁴³⁶

This production of faith through participation in Lakewood's narrative texts is intensified by its collectivity. In 'The Transmission of Affect', Teresa Brennan challenges the notion of the superiority of the individual within Western thought and the biologically contained and determined self. Instead, she foregrounds the idea that our emotions are not always our own and explains how groups, crowds or gatherings can seem to be 'of one mind.'⁴³⁷ Affect, for Brennan, is essentially social. Brennan clarifies that affect is not the abstract feeling of anger, awe or happiness for example, but the energetic impact of a feeling on a body, the sensations that feeling might give rise to. Stating that the transmission of affect is not a monocausal explanation for the psychology of crowds, but a single, crucial factor within them,⁴³⁸ Brennan highlights that affects are pre-eminently social and

⁴³¹ Rakow, 'Religious Branding,' 228.

⁴³² Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 4.

⁴³³ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 4.

⁴³⁴ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 42.

⁴³⁵ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 42.

⁴³⁶ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 24.

⁴³⁷ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 8. Neurologists describe the chemical or electrical process of 'entrainment' whereby one person's nervous and hormonal systems begin to align with another's. 'People can act alike and feel alike not only because they observe each other but also because they imbibe each other via smell.' (Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 10).

⁴³⁸ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 61.

pre-exist us, being both within and outside of our bodies.⁴³⁹ Notwithstanding other factors that influence our likeliness to act differently within a crowd, Brennan states that: ‘to be caught up in an affect is to be caught up in it’ and that without containment or self-detachment: ‘what we are left with is an affective force in common that says “me” precisely when it is most lacking in individual distinctiveness.’⁴⁴⁰ Brennan writes:

The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The “atmosphere” or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before...it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organism or its genes.⁴⁴¹

Affective atmospheres, through their perception and transmission, produce a physical change in the congregant. Atmospheres literally, if perhaps temporarily, change the individual, their mood or disposition, their bodies and minds aligning with the crowd. For Brennan, affect and cognition are not two separate systems: the shift that occurs on transmission accompanies a judgement, an attitude or *orientation* toward an object.⁴⁴² Thoughts may be provoked by the affect as much as provoking it, but may not correspond entirely to the affect either.⁴⁴³ Believers, oriented toward narrative texts at Lakewood, experience the immersive sensory overload of performative vocalisation, spectacular imagery and scale, and rhythmic auditory and haptic stimulation. Here thought and sensation intermingle and the identity of believer is re-enacted and reinforced in pleasurable embodied encounter.

Brennan makes a link between group or crowd theory and the biochemical phenomenon of entrainment, where affective response between people is linked and repeated. Along with mimesis, sensory perception is key, but particularly the senses of smell, hearing and vision.⁴⁴⁴ Images and sounds are experienced within the brain as physical ‘vibrations,’ as ‘valence,’ which transmits affect, with the potential to create hormonal response: ‘sights and sounds are physical matters in themselves, carriers of social matters, social in origin but physical in their effects. Every word, every sound, has its valence; so, at a more subtle level, may every image.’⁴⁴⁵ Chemically we transmit through pheromones through touch and smell, which relate not only to sexual behaviour but also have a communicative function and are released externally into the air to affect others.⁴⁴⁶ The environment, particularly the environment in the form of other people, produces changes in our hormones, our endocrinology. Bodily affect, the sensation produced by belief at Lakewood, literally fills the air, creating a climate. Brennan additionally highlights the importance of the mimetic drive of rhythm within art and performance, although rhythmic collective expression is a conscious experience, whereas chemical entrainment works unconsciously.

⁴³⁹ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 65.

⁴⁴⁰ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 68.

⁴⁴¹ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 1.

⁴⁴² Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 5.

⁴⁴³ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 7.

⁴⁴⁴ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 52.

⁴⁴⁵ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 71.

⁴⁴⁶ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 69.

Highlighting the importance of rhythm as a ‘sensuous, threshold’⁴⁴⁷ experience that produces affect and entrains beliefs, Stevenson writes that:

Rhythm is a fundamental way that performances produce these effects, with the actor’s body generating particularly powerful rhythms...However, a variety of other performative elements also produce rhythms: the stage space and environment surrounding the spectators, material props, costumes and set pieces, lighting and soundscape, staging and textual choices, and the spectators’ own bodies.⁴⁴⁸

Kinaesthetic, rhythmic participation produces alignment and mirroring between bodies. A ‘rhythmic point of contact’ between congregant and event ‘supports certain ideologies and cultivate particular religious beliefs...this rhythmic dimension helps performances function as powerful religious tools.’⁴⁴⁹ This can be applied to the immersive musical rhythms, repetitive collective vocalisations and spontaneous movements and gestures within the crowd at Lakewood, from sitting, standing, praying, singing, swaying and dancing. Brennan writes that rhythm has a: ‘unifying, regulating role in affective exchanges between two or more people. The rhythmic aspects of behaviour at a gathering are critical in establishing and enhancing a sense of collective purpose and a common understanding.’⁴⁵⁰

Rhythmic alignment can be seen historically in embodied Pentecostal religious expressions of dancing, calling back in response to a prompt, collective prayer, singing and ecstatic bodily movement. In the nineteenth century, congregations would ‘line out’ a psalm or hymn with the help of a precentor, until hymnals with printed lyrics were used. Now screens enable all bodies to read from the same page. Stevenson points out that as they read the song lyrics, congregants heads tilt upwards, creating openness, allowing them to get into the ‘flow.’⁴⁵¹ She also notes the mesmeric, hard to resist quality of the screens mediate the preacher into a ‘hypermediacy.’⁴⁵² Similarly, when the cameras are trained onto close ups of expressive faces caught in the emotion of the moment, this triggers the mirror neuron responses in the congregant, resulting in simulation. It is still common at Lakewood and other evangelical churches for congregants to call out during worship or the message to vocalise their alignment with phrases such as ‘amen!’, ‘yes Lord!’, ‘thank you Lord!’ or ‘Hallelujah!’ At Lakewood, congregants are encouraged to join in with collective prayer, and to make their way to the front of church for prayer for conversion, healing and comfort. Immersion in the voluminous, rhythmic, vibratory sound makes it hard to resist mirroring the dancing, gesturing bodies on stage. The believers in the crowd, moved by auditory and visual texts, dance and sway. Hands are raised by preachers and musicians, the bodies in the congregation do the same, opening themselves up to the presence that seems to materialise during worship. Whilst participants experience of the worship service is unique to them, the mirroring between bodies enables degrees of alignment, an orientation toward Lakewood’s narrative texts. Rakow writes: ‘through repeated participation, worship services and their particular atmospheres foster, inculcate, and support the embodied dispositions of an Evangelical or

⁴⁴⁷ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 218.

⁴⁴⁸ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 24.

⁴⁴⁹ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 25.

⁴⁵⁰ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 70.

⁴⁵¹ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 185.

⁴⁵² Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 189.

neo-Pentecostal habitus.⁴⁵³ In the hypermediated space of the megachurch, as ‘intense pleasure’⁴⁵⁴ is experienced, bodies become transfigured and the encounter is understood as real.⁴⁵⁵

Additionally, Stevenson notes that within evangelical dramaturgy, shifts between representation and the real create an oscillation within the body. She writes that: ‘rather than realistic representation, evangelical dramaturgy instead aims for realistic re-representations.’⁴⁵⁶ This re-representation complicates direct representation.

Evangelicalism doesn’t aim to accurately represent religious events such as Christ’s atonement, but instead creates a sense of the divine or ineffable through material and visual forms, allowing them to channel atonement anew in each encounter. Here time is collapsed, overlapping with the collapsing of time in the speaking of faith-filled words during Word of Faith vocalisation, and the encounter appears authentically divine.⁴⁵⁷ The narrative texts don’t disappear, but instead manifest transcendence, transmitting divine presence.⁴⁵⁸ As these narrative texts create an simultaneous oscillation between presence and representation, a state of flux is engendered, a ‘perceptual multi-stability,’⁴⁵⁹ a sense of pleasurable disorientation.

For Maria José de Abreu, oscillation (here it is the oscillation of religious breath), rather than creating a play between mediation and immediacy, creates a religious body that is spiritually fit and susceptible to populism, both religious and political. De Abreu reveals the embodied and recursive nature of Charismatic Catholic church practices in Brazil, which she frames as a gymnasium that produces spiritual health. The operations within media montages, speech, gestures, spaces, and objects are rule, logic, play, principle and mass reproducibility, repetitions across bodies that manifest, for Charismatic Catholics, the space of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶⁰ De Abreu ties these embodied operations to ‘pneuma’ – the acts of breathing, ‘the oscillating and paradoxical movements of expansion and contraction.’⁴⁶¹ De Abreu writes of the role of this:

‘new regime of devotional practices...in a vast respiratory religious program—popularly branded as “the aerobics of Jesus”—in reforming Brazil’s Catholicism in doctrine as well as in conduct. Gathering in stadiums, big tents, sports venues, or old hangars, Charismatics transform spaces into gymnasiums for devotion...well-orchestrated juxtapositions of choreographed bodily gestures and exercises, with mass media technologies, popular culture repertoires, and elements from Greek Orthodox theological doctrine’⁴⁶²

Within the elasticity and fluidity of operation, there is an oscillation and an undecidability, but for de Abreu this strengthens and revitalises the institution, building its muscle mass, rather than breaking it, through the incorporation of such a radical opposition. These bodies are trained in religious practices that make them

⁴⁵³ Rakow, ‘The Light of the World,’ 103.

⁴⁵⁴ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 218.

⁴⁵⁵ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 219.

⁴⁵⁶ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 36.

⁴⁵⁷ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 38. Interestingly, Stevenson links this experience to medieval ‘incarnational theology’ and the devotional shift toward affective piety: ‘evangelicalism’s emphasis on the born-again experience, coupled with its crucicentric theology, ground it in many of the same ideas inherent to medieval incarnational theology.’ (Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 38).

⁴⁵⁸ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 39.

⁴⁵⁹ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 39.

⁴⁶⁰ Maria José de. Abreu. *The Charismatic Gymnasium: Breath, Media, and Religious Revivalism in Contemporary Brazil*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 8, 13.

⁴⁶¹ José de. Abreu. *The Charismatic Gymnasium*, 9.

⁴⁶² José de. Abreu. *The Charismatic Gymnasium*, 2.

congruent with the rise of Brazilian neoliberalism, they become pliable within totalitarianism and Bolsonarismo.⁴⁶³

Inside Lakewood's Sanctuary, receptive bodies experience a range of sensory stimuli, affects and beliefs spread, pneumatically, rhythmically, haptically, within an affective climate. As noted in the introduction, political scientists Wald and Hill found that even without including overt political content in sermons, churches still conveyed political attitudes to members, creating a convergence in congregants' beliefs and attitudes over time.⁴⁶⁴ At Lakewood, as outlined in Chapter One, political attitudes are subtly embedded within an American redemption story that leans toward social and political conservatism. The question of agency and will arises. Whilst the congregant is not a passive receptacle and chooses, often enthusiastically, to enter into the performative story-world, the believer is not a blank slate as they enter into Lakewood, but already formed of a set of influences and ideas about why their identity as believer is important, and these ideas circulate within American culture at large. A recent study by the Pew Research Centre shows that 45% of Americans believe that America should be a Christian nation, and 60% believe that the founding fathers of America intended it to be a Christian nation.⁴⁶⁵ Whilst Brennan offers a new perspective on affect as a social, collectively shared phenomenon, her study doesn't extend to the narrative texts that affect arises from or the atmospheres that are produced. The multi-sensory experience of space, environment and design are all significant actants in the production of affect, atmosphere and a climate of belief.

Atmosphere is not only a meteorological term, it denotes a diffuse, immaterial region of space, a potent horizon which carries emotion. The study of atmospheres has been addressed largely within philosophy and aesthetic theory,⁴⁶⁶ and is generally approached through a human-centred phenomenology. Within philosophy, Böhme describes them as the 'sphere of felt bodily presence,'⁴⁶⁷ for Walter Benjamin, an aura, a strange 'connective tissue of space and time.'⁴⁶⁸ Hermann Schmitz considers them to be the: 'spatial bearer of moods.'⁴⁶⁹ Atmosphere is an elusive phenomenon. It is grasped pre-reflexively and felt emotionally before being understood intellectually. It arises inter-subjectively, between people, things, situations and settings. This liminality, between subject and object,⁴⁷⁰ is reflected in the indeterminate designations of atmospheres as:

⁴⁶³ José de. Abreu. *The Charismatic Gymnasium*, 3, 6.

⁴⁶⁴ Wald, Owen and Hill Jr., 'Churches as Political Communities,' <https://doi.org/10.2307/1957399>.

⁴⁶⁵ Smith, Gregory A., Micheal Rotolo and Patricia Tevington, '45% of Americans Say U.S. Should Be a "Christian Nation" Pew Research Center. Accessed 10th February 2023.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/45-of-americans-say-u-s-should-be-a-christian-nation/>.

⁴⁶⁶ Gernot Böhme and Jean-Paul Thibaud, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, (London: Routledge, 2018); Hermann Schmitz et al., *New phenomenology: A Brief Introduction*, (Milan: Mimesis International, 2019); Tonino Griffero, trans. Sarah De Sanctis, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) et al.

⁴⁶⁷ Gernot Böhme, 'Learning to live with atmospheres: a new aesthetic humanist education,' in Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013), 111.

⁴⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility: Second version' (E. Jephcott, R. Livingstone, H. Eiland, & Others, Trans.), in M. W. Jennings, B. Doherty, & T. Y. Levin (Eds.), *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 23.

⁴⁶⁹ Hermann Schmitz in Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics* (Thesis Eleven, 1993), 36.

⁴⁷⁰ Gernot Böhme, 'Urban Atmospheres: Charting New Directions for Architecture and Urban Planning,' in Christian Borch (Ed.) *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014), 43.

‘quasi-things,’⁴⁷¹ ‘half-entities,’⁴⁷² and ‘quasi-objects.’⁴⁷³ Simon Runkel writes of the immersive and participatory character of atmospheres, the rhythmic imitative waves of ideas and sentiment that become spatialized in overarching atmospheres.⁴⁷⁴ An individual might be enclosed within an atmosphere but not open to it, so an attitude of openness towards the atmosphere must exist within the subject in order to fully experience it.⁴⁷⁵ If the atmosphere is recognised, it can also be interpreted in different ways by people within it.⁴⁷⁶ Rakow, for example, frames megachurch atmospheres as a ‘communicative offer’ that is not experienced in the intended way by every attendee or spectator. She writes that: ‘worship attendees might respond in various ways and intensities of immersion or not respond at all.’⁴⁷⁷

Peter Zumthor has pointed to the atmospheric effects of architectural space, how they create multi-sensory experiences that impact our bodies and emotional states through their acoustical, visual, olfactory and haptic qualities. Böhme writes of how staging, lighting and acoustics are immersive, producing background atmospheres for performances and are: ‘capable, on the one hand, of making the stage and the events on it appear in a special light and, on the other, creating an acoustic space that *tunes* the whole.’⁴⁷⁸ Music, for Böhme, is the ‘foundational atmospheric art,’ shaping the listener’s disposition in space, directly intervening in bodily economy.⁴⁷⁹ At Lakewood, Tom Stanziano, the lighting director, is sent a song list at the beginning of each week for the following weekend’s worship services. Listening to the selection, he then customises the lighting design for the service to create a series of atmospheres that will be produced through the combination of music and light.⁴⁸⁰ The upbeat, easy to sing, melodies of the worship music at Lakewood are easy to memorise through repetitious phrases and words, often repeated over and over again in the same song. In this way, emotion is channelled through a combination of harmonious, uplifting chords and hopeful lyrics, producing and transmitting affect.

Christian Borch foregrounds how atmospheres are deliberately produced by architects and designers to achieve certain objectives. Architecture and the built environment, through their bodily impressions, produce power relations. Reflecting Stevenson’s analysis, these bodily experiences can be instrumentalised towards certain ideological ends.⁴⁸¹ For example, Böhme and others have shown how multi-sensory manipulations are deployed commercially to encourage us to part with our money, through the staging and branding of products with which we can interact before we buy, the pumping in of smells (perfume, freshly baked bread) and muzak,

⁴⁷¹ Tonino Griffero and Sarah De Sanctis, *Quasi-Things: the Paradigm of Atmospheres*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2018).

⁴⁷² Hermann Schmitz, Rudolf Owen Müllan, and Jan Slaby, ‘Emotions Outside the Box—the New Phenomenology of Feeling and Corporeality’, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10, no. 2 (June 2011): 241–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9195-1>, 246.

⁴⁷³ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 76.

⁴⁷⁴ Simon Runkel, ‘Collective Atmospheres. Phenomenological Explorations of Protesting Crowds with Canetti, Schmitz, and Tarde’, *Ambiances*, 20 March 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.1067>.

⁴⁷⁵ C. Costa, S. Carmenates, L. Madeira & G. Stanghellini, ‘Phenomenology of atmospheres. The felt meanings of clinical encounters,’ *Journal of Psychopathology*, 20(4), 351–357, 2014: 354.

⁴⁷⁶ Dylan Trigg, ed., *Atmospheres and Shared Emotions*, *Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 8.

⁴⁷⁷ Rakow, ‘The Light of the World,’ 102.

⁴⁷⁸ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 162.

⁴⁷⁹ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 127.

⁴⁸⁰ Rakow, ‘The Light of the World,’ 95.

⁴⁸¹ Christian Borch, ‘The Politics of Atmospheres; Architecture, Power, and the Senses,’ in Borch (Ed.) *Architectural Atmospheres*, 86.

occurring often at a non-conscious level.⁴⁸² Jim Drobnick notes how such strategies positively impact customer mood, perception of brand and how much time and money we spend and our likeliness to return.⁴⁸³ Linking this to the megachurch, positive multi-sensory experience can create ‘human place-attachment’ - embedding identity through enjoyable participation and repetition. Drawing on the research of R.B Taylor into human territorial functioning and the ‘territorial imperative,’ Goh writes: ‘in providing stimulation for their congregation members, megachurches may be doing more than just enticing them to visit and entertaining them when they occasionally do so; they may also be building and reinforcing a “territorial imperative” that operates at an “innate” level to form affective attachments to a particular space.’⁴⁸⁴ Within architecture and design, multi-sensory experiences are knowingly deployed to alter behaviour. ‘These atmospheres are both: ‘shells that offer protection and make sense of the world,’ but also create a power dynamic at an unconscious level: ‘embedded in larger objectives of governing behaviours, experiences, and desires.’⁴⁸⁵



Fig. 30. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

A power dynamic operates at Lakewood through the orchestration of the total artwork, creating the powerfully sensational space of the worship service. On my first visit to a Lakewood service, I found myself drawn inexorably into its performative, aestheticised logics, despite my best efforts at distance. Johannes Voelz’s consideration of how aesthetics are deployed within populist political rallies, focussing on those held by Trump

⁴⁸² Gernot Böhme, *Anmutungen. Über das Atmosphärische*, (Ostfildern vor Stuttgart: Edition Tertium, Arcaden, 1998), 71–84.

⁴⁸³ Jim Drobnick, ‘Eating Nothing: Cooking Aromas in Art and Culture’, in Jim Drobnick (Ed.) *The Smell Culture Reader*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 346.

⁴⁸⁴ Goh, ‘The Experience Megachurch,’ 49; and R. B. Taylor, *Human Territorial Functioning: An Empirical, Evolutionary Perspective on Individual and Small Group Territorial Cognitions, Behaviors, and Consequences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45–46.

⁴⁸⁵ Borch *Architectural Atmospheres*, 86.

in the lead up to and during his presidency, forms a useful comparison in reflecting on how power relations are reinforced during public events where a crowd is present.⁴⁸⁶ Voelz frames the rally as a crucial factor on which American right-wing populism depends, through the claim inherent in the rally that there is no difference between the representative and the represented, experienced by the crowd as a 'felt reality.'⁴⁸⁷ This political populism might be applied to the religious populism at Lakewood. A collapse of identities both amongst the crowd and also between divine and human (Stevenson's religious re-representations creating sensations of disorientation) is enacted. Voelz draws on John Judis's designation of right-wing populism as 'triadic' – the 'people' are distinguished from political and social elites, but also from those excluded from their (usually national) community. Within the wider evangelical movement, particularly for White traditionalists and the Christian Right, a perception of immoral forces at work politically and intellectually, hinted at in Lisa Osteen Come's Signs of the End Times series and alluded to in a mistrust of expert opinion, forms a possible elite against which Lakewood believers might differentiate themselves. The excluded – although the imaginary insists that the door is always open, as long as people enter on Lakewood's terms – are those that don't believe, manifesting as the unfavoured, the losers, the moaners, those on a downward trajectory. Fear arises in relation to the moral decay of the nation that will only intensify as the church enters the last age.

Voelz states that within political populism, the representative uses techniques of 'performative polarization.' These techniques create a polarized political response to the representative as a celebrity figure. Representation occurs in performative acts during the rally, generated by the performance, creating affective bonds between representative and represented and a non-critical response. Analysing the crowds at Trump's rallies, Voelz comments that: 'Not only do they seem to give up any capacity for judging the representative claim; they seem to cease to exist as independent subjects altogether. Instead they engage in forms of expression that signal to the senses – to their own and to their observers' – an overpowering sense of sameness. They chant in rhythmic homogeneity and often make gestures in synchronicity.'⁴⁸⁸ This forms into 'the will of the people' – a presence that cannot be challenged. But will suggests autonomy, and this 'will of the people' actually arises as a response to staging, performance, rhythmic entrainment and the transmission of affect within a set of power relations, orchestrated by a leader in a reciprocal performance with the crowd.

Voelz compares the Gesamtkunstwerk of the National Socialist movement (NSDAP) rallies of the 1930s to Trumpian rallies. The Nazi rallies at Nuremberg were carefully curated and controlled 'political liturgies' enacted within a purposely designed, monumental site for a communal experience.⁴⁸⁹ The leader formed one element amongst a combination of ideologically driven texts. The emphasis here was on duration and immutability, the timelessness of the regime. However, at Republican rallies, the focus is largely on Trump, and mutability and unpredictability reign, producing a visceral sense of the 'now.'⁴⁹⁰ His performative style is one where linguistic expression takes precedent over content, where the performance could fall apart at any

⁴⁸⁶ Johannes Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism, Part I: The Populist Space of Appearance." *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature (REAL)* 34 (2018): 203–28.

⁴⁸⁷ Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 204.

⁴⁸⁸ Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 207-208.

⁴⁸⁹ Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 210-211.

⁴⁹⁰ Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 211.

moment, its affective force predicated on surprise, changeability, impermanence. He 'lets go' rhetorically, veering into and back out of the protocols of political speech, forming an experience for the attendees based in the present moment.⁴⁹¹ For Voelz, this has a democratizing effect. The crowd, like Trump, shares in the same unfolding contingent present, where not even Trump fully knows what he will say.⁴⁹²

Voelz also highlights the way in which he is staged and broadcast with a carefully curated selection of supporters positioned directly behind him rising up in a steep bank. The supporters, like the crowd at Lakewood, exceed the frame of the screen, appearing as an endless mass. The viewer watching on TV or social media is able to clearly see the facial expressions and gestures of his supporters, chanting, clapping and cheering in response to his speech. Participants in the rally therefore consciously 'co-perform' in the media production.⁴⁹³ Highlighting the affective force of the rally, Voelz considers that collective chants are not performed for their content but for their: 'recognizable power as chants. Chants become chant-alongs, and they are self-reflexively greeted as such.' For Voelz, echoing Butler's performative acts that construct gender identity in the moment of performing them, rallies are not an expression of some pre-existing political will, but act to materialise unity as they take place. This happens through 'affective intensities' that occur in collective expressions of unity⁴⁹⁴ in response to the perceived otherness of those others in the triadic relation.

Whilst not a fascist institution, Lakewood, to some degree, shares the Gesamtkunstwerk aesthetic totality of an National Socialist rally. Lakewood is not overtly authoritarian or instrumentalised toward defined or overt political ends. It does however seek to establish an enduring community based on exclusion and inclusion. Affective intensities arise as the individual recognises themselves as 'believer,' as a part of the crowd who align with Joel. Lakewood communicates the social and political conservatism of the American evangelical movement in covert ways. This wider movement continues to host nationalist and quasi-fascist groups and institutions, as outlined later in this chapter. Joel Osteen is not a charismatic demagogue, but he is the image of an inspirational everyman, who although he appears benign, enables and sustains the cultural and political status quo through the creation of a community based on his celebrity status, vapid quasi-religious aphorism and American values that seem to advance individual freedom, family, ambition and moral certainty. For his followers, he is a figure who claims and experiences divine power, but whether empowerment actually accrues to Lakewood's crowd is questionable. The entertaining, seductive aspects of Lakewood's story-world, combined with the emphasis on positive thinking and self-actualisation are instrumentalised toward being a 'good' Christian. This has become almost synonymous with being an ideal American citizen in socially conservative terms. The appearance of meaning and depth obscures the need for real engagement with the complexity of current realities in America, not least the urgency of calling out White evangelical nationalists who continue to support Trumpism.

⁴⁹¹ Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 212-213.

⁴⁹² Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 214.

⁴⁹³ Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 214-215.

⁴⁹⁴ Voelz, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism," 226.

Joel, unlike Trump, does not embody mutability. In sticking carefully to a tight, repetitive script, the congregation know what to expect and he delivers it. Trump's volatile performance where content is inserted only when necessary, where it is almost as though 'language is driving the conversational car'⁴⁹⁵ appears to emerge like glossolalia, where meaning breaks down to become pure expression, expression for expressions sake, much like Nancy's assertion of the teller of the myth operating on the will to communicate.⁴⁹⁶ His uneven speeches are 'all discourse markers, no discourse,'⁴⁹⁷ forming an unfolding, undecidable present. Failure and collapse of the conventions of the political rally are ever present. This undecidability emerges at Lakewood only when Joel is overcome with emotion, signalling a connection to something divine, when collective vocalisations during prayer or singing lead to the expectation of the miraculous, or when speaking in tongues breaks out. Here it is a collapse of the natural world into the supernatural that is anticipated, a bringing into the present moment a future moment of salvation, a 'realised eschatology.'⁴⁹⁸ There are marked differences between Osteen and Trump, but both embody facets of American identity at large, and both are straight, white men of wealth and power (one purportedly apolitical but religious, the other political and purportedly religious) who, to varying levels, abdicate responsibility to seemingly 'give' the crowd what they want, or to get the crowd in through the door. A mutual reinforcement exists between crowd and leader, but the leader has the upper hand. The crowd is subject to a story-world coordinated by the powerful. Trump's White nationalism, racism and misogyny are overt. These traits are not detectable within the kind family man Osteen, and yet it is a White, exceptionalist America he is advancing. Böhme writes that: 'atmospheres are experienced as an emotional effect. For this reason, the art of producing them – above all in music, but also throughout the entire spectrum of aesthetic work, from the stage set to the orchestration of mass demonstrations, from the design of malls to the imposing architecture of court buildings – is at all times also an exercise of power.'⁴⁹⁹

Lakewood, like other populist movements, appears to institute community, but it is a community that admits on certain terms and within certain ideological constraints, where identities must be continually performed and where dissent is discouraged and excluded. Lakewood's imaginary of difference from the surrounding culture, its' purporting of difference, partially occludes that it actually operates as a quasi-religious aesthetic and performative regime perpetuating the same ideas and inequalities inherent in wider power structures. Whilst imaging a diverse crowd, it continues to advance an American ideal of White, heteronormative wellness, wealth and 'progress.' It does not work to fulfil its promise of an equal and democratic crowd. It values feeling and sensation over criticality or independent thought, accepting things at face value, foreclosing curiosity or difficult questions that might not be easily answered. In the embodied encounter, collective affect is the proof of authenticity and authority. The performative acts of the Osteen family identify them as representatives of both divine power and the people who they claim to represent. They embody the potential within the crowd, but it is not a potential to be otherwise, but only to align within certain norms and constraints.

⁴⁹⁵ Katy Waldman, "Trump's Tower of Babble," Slate, accessed 11th July 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/11/how-donald-trump-uses-language-and-why-we-cant-stop-listening.html>.

⁴⁹⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 57.

⁴⁹⁷ Waldman, "Trump's Tower of Babble."

⁴⁹⁸ Miller and Carlin, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject,' 34.

⁴⁹⁹ Böhme, 'Urban Atmospheres,' in Borch, *Architectural Atmospheres*, 46.

As politics, entertainment and aesthetics have collided in wider American society,⁵⁰⁰ so have religion and an aestheticised entertainment at Lakewood. But this sensational religious populism carries an implicit politics. Whilst the Osteens would contend that the main goal and ethos of Lakewood is to advance love, knowable exclusively through the truth of the Bible, this seemingly benevolent aim is used to model and direct a set of ideas about correct behaviour and living that are loosely Biblically based, but rather more inflected with a Western, American, capitalistic idea of Christian living. It is a love without reflexivity or criticality, funnelled through a set of ideas that arise from Lakewood's context.

Writing in relation to traditional Catholic/ High Protestant church space Böhme writes that atmospheres, as expansive and diffuse feeling, can be explained as 'impressions by divine beings'⁵⁰¹ but that churches do not want to recognise how atmospheres are staged.⁵⁰² In my experience of evangelicalism, staging and performance are not seen in conflict with the realness of God or authenticity of religious encounter, but rather, channels (passive and impotent without God) through which His presence is drawn down to meet with worshipping bodies. The imaginary excludes and represses that these tools also carry other meanings and experiences.

Böhme's notions of atmosphere can be applied to the performance of the mega at Lakewood and the perception of vast scale creating sensations of limitlessness, disorientation and, potentially, the sublime. Pointing to the importance of contrast in provoking this experience through moving from a notably different atmosphere into another,⁵⁰³ this could be applied to stepping across the threshold into the Sanctuary at Lakewood. Böhme describes entering the silence of traditional ecclesiastical structures, but at Lakewood, it is a stepping from the relative enclosure of the stairwell into the vast auditorium that produces a visceral reaction of shock. This is then replicated as worship starts up, and the colossal volume of music spills out toward the congregant as an overwhelming flood. Here the sense of being in a bounded body is complicated by the immersive text of music.

The shifts between an orienting story and a disorienting experience in the worship service produces a dynamic tension between limitlessness and stability, forming into a sense of dis/orientation. Pleasure is key in making this an experience believers will return to again and again. Drawing on my past experiences within Charismatic evangelicalism, where it falls into a more threatening disorientation (arguably rarely), it is framed as the 'fear of God.' This is an overwhelming sensation where dissolution is countenanced ('But,' [God] said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.' Ex. 30: 20, NIV), placing God as an all-powerful deity over fallible and vulnerable man. But much more common is the sense of a pleasurable dizziness, an openness to a warm, forgiving presence. In this warmly comforting space, the imagery that has bolstered Lakewood's story to make

⁵⁰⁰ As noted by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1937): "Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical out-come of fascism is an aestheticising of political life." (Benjamin 2008, 41).

⁵⁰¹ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 167.

⁵⁰² Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 169.

⁵⁰³ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 174.

it authoritative, world-founding and elemental, forms an idealised, beatific space. Böhme, reflecting affective descriptions in Stevenson’s oscillation between ‘presence’ and ‘representation,’ and Brennan’s multivalent ‘vibration,’ writes of the ambivalence or alternating sensations inherent in an experience of the sublime in relation to vastness:

It is precisely this slipping that allows one to feel one’s own limits and thereby the smallness of one’s body. Feelings alternate between slipping into infinity and being thrown back upon one’s body. They thus create the ambivalence that belongs to being affected by the sublime. If this were not the case, that is, if bodily awareness indeed disappeared into infinity, one would not sense sublimity but the so-called oceanic feeling. To sense the sublime – in this case of the church space – contrast is required: the simultaneous sensing of one’s own presence in space, that is, one’s lost, disoriented presence, in an over-large space.⁵⁰⁴

Both scale, manifesting in the architecture of the Sanctuary, and the seeming limitlessness of the crowd, combined with symbols of the globe and the overwhelming immersion in very loud, vibratory music, prompts these oscillations, experienced as affective sensations in the body, interpreted as ‘real’ spiritual encounter.



Fig. 31. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

Returning to the oscillatory aspect of the embodied encounter within the crowd, the moving between a sense of presence and representation, Deborah Bird Rose’s use of the Yolngu concept of *bir’yun* - ‘shimmering’ or the ‘brilliant shimmer of the biosphere,’⁵⁰⁵ might be a less human centred way to understand the states of embodied indeterminacy at play in Lakewood’s atmospherics. This oscillation between different states, for Rose, is

⁵⁰⁴ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 176.

⁵⁰⁵ Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Shimmer: When All You Love Is Being Trashed,’ in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, ed., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 51.

embodied in light and potential. Böhme, foregrounding human culture, categorises light that shines onto things into types including ‘brilliance’ and ‘faint shimmer,’⁵⁰⁶ allowing things to emerge, but also bestowing them with ‘dignity’ and ‘significance’ or with ‘elegant restraint.’⁵⁰⁷ Highlighting the seductive interaction between light, object and human perception, he writes that: ‘the play of light on things... is extraordinarily significant. One may well say that, in design, cosmetics or architecture, the deployment of materials is essentially determined by how their surfaces interact with light.’⁵⁰⁸

Expanding this conception of the play of light to understand human culture as continuous with more-than-human ecologies, Rose writes within the context of multi-species extinction, shimmer is the ‘ancestral power of life’ that arises in ‘relationship and encounter.’⁵⁰⁹ Rather than an aesthetic category, it concerns sensation, feeling and response.⁵¹⁰ Yolngu painters work detailed cross-hatching onto a ‘dull’ painting, transforming the surface into an alluring brightness. Likewise, their ritual song and dance, through temporal patterns of backgrounding and foregrounding, a rhythmic flipping back and forth, take on an iridescence. At the end of the ritual, the song and dance performance closes and the paintings are rubbed out, made dull.⁵¹¹ Rose links this to the patterns and pulses between seasons, from receding into the dry season and back into shimmering water, fertility and growth. For the Yolngu, dullness is not lack, but potential.⁵¹² Here, for Indigenous people, human and non-human culture intermingle. Rose writes: ‘the term bir’yun... — which does not distinguish between domains of nature and culture — is characteristic of a lively pulsating world, not a mechanistic one. Bir’yun shows us that the world is not composed of gears and cogs but of multifaceted, multispecies relations and pulses.’⁵¹³ The Yolngu mirror and call out seasonal growth and life through their ritual performance. At Lakewood, the performing, participating ecological bodies are at a remove from a wider ecology, and growth and life is mediated artificially through technology, the bodies only calling out to themselves and one another. However, these performances produce an atmosphere in which belief and the weathering body of the believer stand in contradiction.

Feminist scholar Astrida Neimanis uses the term ‘weathering’ to conceptualize how body, site and the weather enmesh in a world threatened by climate change. Weathering, for Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, is transcorporeal and intra-active.⁵¹⁴ They write that ‘we are all implicated in one another’s spacetimes as weathermakers.’⁵¹⁵ They also considers weathering a strategy, a way to pay attention to how bodies and sites make and respond to weather and to take responsibility, to consider how we might weather differently. Neimanis and Jennifer. M. Hamilton write:

⁵⁰⁶ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 155.

⁵⁰⁷ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 155.

⁵⁰⁸ Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 155.

⁵⁰⁹ Rose, ‘Shimmer,’ 52.

⁵¹⁰ Rose, ‘Shimmer,’ 53.

⁵¹¹ Rose, ‘Shimmer,’ 54.

⁵¹² Rose, ‘Shimmer,’ 55.

⁵¹³ Rose, ‘Shimmer,’ 55.

⁵¹⁴ In reference to Stacey Alaimo and Karen Barad, see: Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, ‘Weathering: Climate Change and the “Thick Time” of Transcorporeality,’ *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 558–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12064>, 6-8.

⁵¹⁵ Neimanis and Walker, ‘Weathering,’ 5.

Weather is pervasive in ways that makes distinctions between the meteorological and the social rather leaky, not unlike the much-critiqued nature/culture divide... weathering means learning to live with the changing conditions of rainfall, drought, heat, thaw and storm as never separable from the 'total climate' of social, political and cultural existence of bodies.⁵¹⁶

Bill McKibben wrote in 'The End of Nature' in 1989, that the idea of nature: 'will not survive the new global pollution—the carbon dioxide and CFCs and the like... We have changed the atmosphere, and we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial... the world, the whole world, is touched by our work even when that work is invisible.'⁵¹⁷ However, re-configuring the Enlightenment conception of nature as mechanistic, passive and in need of control, and dissolving the problematic separation between nature and culture, is now a necessity in order to address such crises.⁵¹⁸

Thomas H. Ford traces how the impact of Romanticism on shifting understandings of the word 'atmosphere' from simply referring to the air to its much broader metaphorical application today. Romantic poetry imaged atmosphere as both meteorological and a mode of communication. A recent renewed focus on Romantic poetry has reappraised it as 'proto-ecological' in its' critique of both industrialisation and reason, and its' refusal of a dualistic nature-culture divide.⁵¹⁹ Romantic poetry played with historic ideas of weather as an affective medium that might bring with it a sense of foreboding, prophetic clouds of information or traces of far off war.⁵²⁰ In the eighteenth century, Luke Howard's scientific study of weather, including his 1803 taxonomy of clouds, drew attention to the phenomenon of global weather, the idea of war as having the potential to become an all-encompassing atmosphere as it moved across the globe.⁵²¹ Mary A. Favret shows how poet and author Anna Letitia Barbauld and many others 'depicted the climate of war—its political, economic, and emotional consequences—through a catalogue of meteorological metaphors.'⁵²² Ford details Wordsworth's atmospheric poetry and prose, comparing language to the 'air we breathe' and imagination to an 'unfather'd vapour.' He writes of the Romantic metaphorical 'sensory' treatment of atmosphere: 'such atmospheres remain difficult or even impossible to distinguish finally from literal atmospheres. Somatic, aesthetic and affective, they remain correlated with physical materiality, destabilizing the very distinction of literal from figurative language that first licensed their expanded reference.'⁵²³ For the Romantics, atmosphere articulated the relationship between human meaning and non-human nature, never solely cultural or natural. Atmosphere here is understood as meteorological, physiological, historical, aesthetic and affective.⁵²⁴

⁵¹⁶ Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer. M. Hamilton, 'Weathering,' *Feminist Review*, 118(1), (2018): 83, doi: [10.1057/s41305-018-0097-8](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0097-8), 81.

⁵¹⁷ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2022), 57.

⁵¹⁸ See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) and Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).

⁵¹⁹ Dalia Nassar, 'Romantic Empiricism after the "End of Nature"' Contributions to Environmental Philosophy' in Dalia Nassar, ed., *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 297.

⁵²⁰ In 'Living with the Weather,' Johnathan Bate points out Byron's melding of meteorological weather and socio-political context in his 1816 poem 'Darkness' imagining an apocalypse, written during a 'Year Without A Summer' due to volcanic sulphur lowering temperatures and causing crops to fail, and also within a letter to Samuel Rogers during the same summer describing the 'perpetual density' as the fault of the ministry of Castlereagh. (*Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Green Romanticism (Fall, 1996), pp. 431-447).

⁵²¹ Thomas H. Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air: Atmospheric Romanticism in a Time of Climate Change*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4.

⁵²² Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 124.

⁵²³ Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air*, 1.

⁵²⁴ Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air*, 2-3.



Fig. 32. Flood levels at the Buffalo Bayou, July 2019. During Hurricane Harvey, the Buffalo Bayou rose to a record 39 feet at the Shepherd Drive Bridge. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

Lakewood's atmospherics are tinged with both more-than-human nature and affective performances of belief. The expenditure of energy in performing the identity of believer and the impacts of meteorological weathering, weather Lakewood's bodies. The experience of living in an increasingly hot, drought ridden, chemically polluted landscape, susceptible to wildfires, subsidence, flooding and extreme weather events forms a tension. The repetitious performance of belief and the repetitions of climate impacts weather these bodies, wearing them down with the sluggishness and oppression of the sub-tropical heat a constant background during summer months. As Neimanis and Walker demonstrate, human (and more-than-human) bodies form archives of the climate. But these bodies also make future climates possible. Butler's materialising of identity through repeated 'Performative Acts,' as already outlined, includes the possibility of being otherwise, of contesting naturalised and authorised expectations of identity. But, importantly, the relation between acts and conditions isn't just a matter of individual agency, the relation: 'is neither unilateral nor unmediated.'⁵²⁵ Identity is performed in the service of certain power relations, for those who are biologically female for example, it is performed in the service of reproductive interests. For Butler, whilst individual acts do work to maintain systems of oppression, oppression is a result rather of hegemonic social conditions, not the individual acts.⁵²⁶ The individual acts, much like in the space of Lakewood's story-world, re-enact a set of meanings that already exist and have been legitimated socially. These social conventions, in relation to gender, can be both regulatory and punitive, provoking punishment when bodies perform otherwise.⁵²⁷ Whilst gender can be performed differently: 'one is

⁵²⁵ Butler, "Performative Acts," 525.

⁵²⁶ Butler, "Performative Acts," 525.

⁵²⁷ Butler, "Performative Acts," 527.

compelled to live in a world in which gender constitutes univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable...made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control.⁵²⁸

Performing gender otherwise at the individual level risks the punishment by the enforcers of social cohesion and marginalisation. It is at a wider level of the social conversation that shifts are required.

Within traditionalist evangelicalism, somewhat less overt but still implicit at Lakewood, the framing of woman as a 'help mate' of the man, of their fixed place in the family and society at large, forecloses opportunities for leadership, authority and freedom to self-determine. Women are expected to allow men to speak more, to have the platform, to behave within certain expected constraints of purity, humility, service.⁵²⁹ This performance within expected social conventions enables maintenance of the community. For those who live with chronic illness or disability, the performance is one of resilience, belief in wellness whether it is experienced or not, and belief in the miraculous. For those who are queer, the performance is one of straightness. Likewise, belief is performed by Black and Brown bodies that have to act as though structural inequalities don't exist, but instead any barriers to the perfect life are their own lack of belief in God's blessing. Ways to perform belief whilst finding freedom to perform outside of restrictive expectations must also be found.

Katherine Stewart links the pro-slavery lineage of Christian nationalism and the drive to 'reclaim' the nation as a Christian republic to White evangelical support for Trump, writing that: 'Slavery may have ended with the Thirteenth Amendment, but the system of economic exploitation through racial division lives on, and the proslavery theology that sustained it in an earlier time did not simply vanish.'⁵³⁰ In Christian nationalism, Whiteness and American identity are one and the same. In this imagined Christian republic, women are subordinate to men, the church controls state education and no-one pays taxes to support Black people.⁵³¹ Andrew Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry find that: 'it is no overstatement to suggest that much of the Christian nationalist rhetoric born out of the Religious Right finds its roots in the desire to create boundaries of ground membership around race and the right of white Americans to segregate themselves from minorities.'⁵³²

In the wake of police officer Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd on 25th May 2020, 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. Osteen appears in the midst of this other crowd, covid face mask in place, and is captured on protestors mobile phones, next to someone who appears to be a Black body guard who sticks closely to him throughout. In the days following, Joel is pictured repetitively in the media, amidst this differently identifying crowd. It is a crowd that is urgent and angry, in a cycle of protracted grieving

⁵²⁸ Butler, "Performative Acts," 528.

⁵²⁹ Evangelical 'purity culture' which includes the propagation of abstinence only until marriage is a problematic aspect of the movement, negatively impacting on female physical, emotional, and sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction.

See: Lauryn Leigh Estrada, 'Clinical Considerations of the Evangelical Purity Movement's Impact on Female Sexuality,' *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 48:2, (2022), pp.121-132, DOI: [10.1080/0092623X.2021.1977445](https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2021.1977445)

⁵³⁰ Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, (London, New York etc.: Bloomsbury 2020),124.

⁵³¹ Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*, 113.

⁵³² Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 100.

with every new Black body that has been killed at the hands of White authority. In participating, he risks losing his 'impartial' status and enters an explicitly political arena. He also risks anger and violence being directed toward him too. He will be aware that he is not universally popular. During both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey, Osteen was widely criticised for initially refusing to open the doors of the church to shelter evacuees, with Black and Brown people affected the most by the disasters.

This appearance during the protest seems to suggest that Osteen is part of this crowd, is identifying with them in solidarity. However, Osteen is imaged on his own terms and works hard to maintain his brand during this encounter. He controls his image as both celebrity preacher and man of the people and sticks to the script. Interviewed during the march, Osteen smiles constantly throughout his replies, stating that whilst he is there to stand with his Black brothers and sisters, 'I think we can turn the anger into action. We can do our part to love one another, to treat each other with respect and honor.' He continues by saying: 'I don't believe George's death is going to be in vain...God knows how to take what was meant for harm and somehow bring good out of it. This could be a turning point in our city and our nation. We can learn to love and accept each other in spite of our differences.'⁵³³ Instead of taking the opportunity to highlight the urgency of racial justice, systemic racism and police brutality, he persists with his trademark smile and flattens out the complexities of the ongoing violence into an on brand message that whilst we all have (individual) responsibility, it is God, not those in power, who will miraculously pave the way for change.

During Black history month at Lakewood (February 2023), the churchwide theme is "Black History: Our Past. Our Future." An email alerting congregants to the event states: 'Visit the Lakewood Bookstore to purchase your Black History Month Commemorative T-shirt and to browse highlighted books and merchandise by Black authors and creators.' In addition, a health screening aimed at Black Americans and a business entrepreneur event are offered. Three services on the theme are scheduled, with the titles: 'Owning Your Story,' 'Having a Teachable Spirit' and 'The Power of Testimony,' appearing to replicate Lakewood's pattern of focussing on individual responsibility rather wider, structural change.⁵³⁴

Christina Sharpe details 'the orthography of the wake' (representations of Black life haunted by slavery), utilising the term 'climate' to poetically demonstrate how certain ideas and belief orientations take hold collectively. Sharp writes of colonial capitalisms ongoing legacy through destabilised meteorological and cultural weather: 'the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack.'⁵³⁵ For Neimanis and Hamilton, the 'total climate' of anti-blackness is not separable from the changing conditions of climate crisis. Similarly, at Lakewood, colonial capitalisms legacy manifests in Black and Brown bodies that face incoming weather unequally. Neimanis and Hamilton write: 'weathering reminds white

⁵³³ KHOU11. 'Joel Osteen says George Floyd's death won't "be in vain"' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUTEj8q1YKI> (Accessed 4th April 2023).

⁵³⁴ Lakewood Church. Email message to author, 'Celebrating Black History Month at Lakewood!' 6th February, 2023.

⁵³⁵ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 104.

settler colonial bodies that learning to weather better cannot be about fortifying our own havens; weathering better requires interrupting our existing patterns of weathermaking.⁵³⁶

The effects of climate change are not equally experienced. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has shown that people who are already marginalised and in poverty are most at risk from climate change, along lines of gender (women are more likely to be poor, in Houston women are less likely to be educated, own their own home, and are 10% more likely to be unemployed),⁵³⁷ disability (those with limited mobility, and in hospitals and nursing homes cannot escape sudden environmental catastrophe, and are more likely to have health impacts from pollutants, heat and drought)⁵³⁸ and race. The worshipping bodies at Lakewood are split fairly evenly the genders, and between Latinx, Whites, and Blacks.⁵³⁹ Latinx and Blacks are still the most likely to be living in poverty in Houston, at almost 25% each, compared to only 8.6% for Whites.⁵⁴⁰

Environmental racism continues to disproportionately affect communities of colour. Black and Latinx communities live in the more deprived neighbourhoods along the Shipping Channel, where oil refineries and chemical plants emit pollutants and cause chemical accidents. During natural disasters, the plants are closed and toxic substances burnt off, increasing the emissions for those living close by and exceeding state limits. These residents, in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, were exposed to higher levels of Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons, released when fossil fuels are burned. PAHs are associated with long-term damage to skin, liver, kidneys and eyes.⁵⁴¹ Additionally, hazardous waste is dumped near these communities, creating a higher risk for respiratory problems, cancer and other chronic conditions. Black children are more than twice as likely to develop asthma than White children and residents near industrial facilities face an additional 22% risk of developing cancer than other Houstonians. Additionally, rising sea levels threaten flooding for these communities and increasingly hot days also disproportionately affect lower income communities.⁵⁴²

Despite its imaginaries, the outside climate cannot be separated from the climate inside Lakewood, which arises as a fabula from Lakewood's therapeutic and teleological, sky-bound narrative, shaping how bodies live, believe and behave. Atmospheres arise from congregants sense of expectation generated by the story-world, a total

⁵³⁶ Neimanis and Hamilton, 'Weathering,' 82.

⁵³⁷ 'Houston, Texas Population 2022,' World Population Review, accessed 9th June 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/houston-tx-population>.

⁵³⁸ See Hong Chen and Mark S. Goldberg, 'The Effects of Outdoor Air Pollution on Chronic Illnesses', *McGill Journal of Medicine: MJM: An International Forum for the Advancement of Medical Sciences by Students* 12, no. 1 (January 2009): 58–64; and Dr. Maria Kett, Gaya Sriskanthan & Ellie Cole, 'Disability and Climate Justice: A Research Project,' (Open Society Foundations, December 2021), accessed 10th June 2022, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/sites/epidemiology_health_care/files/disability_and_climate_justice_research_project_final_to_share.pdf.

⁵³⁹ 'Houston, TX,' Data USA, accessed 9th June 2022, [https://datausa.io/profile/geo/houston-tx#:~:text=The%205%20largest%20ethnic%20groups,%2DHispanic%20\(6.47%25\)](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/houston-tx#:~:text=The%205%20largest%20ethnic%20groups,%2DHispanic%20(6.47%25)).

⁵⁴⁰ 'Houston, Texas Population 2022,' <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/houston-tx-population>.

⁵⁴¹ 'Examining the effects of environmental inequity in Houston,' Understanding Houston, accessed 9th June 2022,

<https://www.understandinghouston.org/blog/examining-the-effects-of-environmental-racism-in-houston#:~:text=Environmental%20racism%20disproportionately%20harms%20communities,predominantly%20Black%20and%20Brown%20neighborhoods>.

⁵⁴² 'Examining the effects of environmental inequity in Houston,' Understanding Houston, accessed 9th June

2022, <https://www.understandinghouston.org/blog/examining-the-effects-of-environmental-racism-in-houston#:~:text=Environmental%20racism%20disproportionately%20harms%20communities,predominantly%20Black%20and%20Brown%20neighborhoods>.

artwork constructed by the church and its leadership, combining with the expectation of the miraculous that might occur arising from the belief in faith-filled words. Believers are oriented towards a performative narration of the story of Lakewood by the preacher, the repeated words, phrases and metaphors that provide mortar to the story. The embodied and rhythmic performance of the worship musicians further cement the beliefs. Rhythmic, embodied participation amongst the crowd: singing, declaring faith, rhythmically dancing, swaying, clapping, calling out praise combines with the brilliance of the lighting, the shimmer of performance that appears and recedes, ebbs and flows at Lakewood. In collective vocalisation and statements of belief, in movement and gesture, alignment and mimesis occurs between the ecology of lively bodies in the site. The congregants experience liquid waves of sound, colour, repetitious words, images and metaphors that create deep wells of disorienting feeling. Within this fluid and collective atmosphere, song lyrics and sermons frequently refer to God as a rock, as solid and stable, offering divine protection from the watery unpredictability of storms and seas. This produces an embodied experience of a collective imaginary of fear, elation, hope, of miraculous possibility and also territorial rescue, of orientation amidst life's uncertainties. For theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, in the immersive quality of atmospheric space, spectators: 'become aware of their own corporeality...in an exchange with their environments. The atmosphere enters their bodies and breaks down their limits.'⁵⁴³ This becomes a space of encounter with what appears as a divine presence, and in the space transformation repetitively occurs from non-believer to believer. Schmitz has directly linked the atmospheric, which he views as being rooted in religious understandings of the experience of an ultimate or transcendent 'other,' to the belief in the outpouring of the 'Holy Spirit.'⁵⁴⁴

But this over-arching story-world is based on an unquestioned set of ideas about what constitutes its community, how the community is constructed from a combination of religious, social and political values. The sky-bound focus at Lakewood orients the believer to look upward toward a returning hero God, to look away from threatening realities in which they are implicated. This threat, as Neimanis and others have pointed out, disproportionately impacts along gender, race, class and ableist lines. To ignore the complexity of the climate of belief at Lakewood is to continue, even if unwitting, White evangelical patriarchy, racism and colonialism.

When the imaginaries within this climate of belief contradict the meteorological climate, when that external climate forcefully breaches the bounds of the site, these tensions are brought into sharp relief and a rupture occurs. The 'real' atmosphere breaches its boundaries, entering the body of the building. This appears to have occurred in 2017, when in response to the criticism surrounding Osteen's failure to open up the church to flood evacuees (the church had previously sheltered victims of Storm Allison in 2001, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005), a series of images were posted on Facebook by Lakewood to show that the building was inaccessible due to flooding. The car park, basement and exterior were all shown submerged. However, posts of photos by a man named Charles Clymer contradicted this, with other eyewitnesses confirming that there was no flooding in or around Lakewood or in nearby roads in that area. Several days after Harvey had hit Houston, Lakewood

⁵⁴³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 120.

⁵⁴⁴ Hermann Schmitz, *Der Gefühlsraum, System der Philosophie*. Vol. 3 (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 2005), 271; Hermann Schmitz, *Atmosphären*, (Freiburg, München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2014), 48.

finally opened as a shelter, arguably in response to the severe criticism it had been receiving.⁵⁴⁵ This breaching of the site, whether it occurred in 2017 or not, is likely to occur again. Whilst not desirable, the immersion of flood water and the damaging, odorous, toxic sludge it can leave behind may act as smelling salts, producing the rupture in perception, breaking both believer and leader out of their dream-like spell within the total work of art.

Apocalypticism in Evangelicalism

The replication of the capitalist ideology of endless accumulation at Lakewood, built on extractivist logics, is problematic in the complex reality of a climate crisis that has already reportedly breached the bounds of the building during Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Studies of White evangelical attitudes in America to the apocalyptic scenarios of climate crisis: intensifying floods, wildfires, hurricanes drought and heat, have consistently shown a lack of concern, mistrust or outright rejection of the science on climate change. Several reasons have been posited for this seeming reticence and rejection, from End Times theology (eschatology)⁵⁴⁶ creating apathy due to the belief that we are experiencing the earth's last days as ordained by God, to a concerted effort by the Christian Right to frame climate crisis as an attempt by left-leaning secularists to discredit Christianity. This coincides with a shift toward politics based on misinformation and conspiracy theories disseminated by social media, including QAnon and voter fraud in the recent US election, with information sources markedly differing according to political affiliation.⁵⁴⁷

White evangelical eschatology is based on the confluence of theology and current political and social events. In the Biblical book of Revelations, the End Times are described as a time of tribulation including wars and natural disasters, including plagues of intense heat, drought, earthquakes and deadly hailstones, to be followed by Christ's return when a new heaven and earth will be instated: "Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.' (Rev. 21:1, NIV) In Houston, the threat of extreme weather events, flooding and subsidence pose a seemingly apocalyptic threat to a city located on the Gulf coast. The Pew Research Centre records almost one in three (30%) people in the Houston Metropolitan area identifying as evangelical Christians.⁵⁴⁸ 58% of White evangelicals in America believe that Jesus will return before 2050 and 41% of Americans *as a whole* believe that Jesus Christ definitely (23%) or probably (18%) will have returned to earth by 2050.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁵ Peck, Jamie. A Houston megachurch shut out flood victims. A Twitter storm opened it.' The Guardian. (Accessed 4th April 2023) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/30/houston-megachurch-shut-out-flood-victims-twitter-storm>.

⁵⁴⁶ Given the myriad ways Biblical texts can be construed, there is dispute amongst Evangelicals as to the exact order of these events. This leads to a number of opposing ideas termed premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism.

⁵⁴⁷ Amy Mitchell, Mark Jurkowitz, J. Baxter Oliphant & Elisa Shearer, 'Political Divides, Conspiracy Theories and Divergent News Sources Heading Into 2020 Election,' Pew Research Center, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/09/16/political-divides-conspiracy-theories-and-divergent-news-sources-heading-into-2020-election/>.

⁵⁴⁸ 'Religious Landscape Study: Adults in the Houston metro area,' Pew Research Center, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/houston-metro-area/>.

⁵⁴⁹ 'Public Sees a Future Full of Promise and Peril', Pew Research Center, accessed 16th September 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/06/22/public-sees-a-future-full-of-promise-and-peril/>.

The particularities of Lakewood's relationship to the more-than-human world are enclosed within a broader evangelical context in which this apocalyptic imaginary has a significant impact on belief and culture. The evangelical imaginary of inevitable and possibly imminent apocalypse is a story that dominates, influencing belief and action. For some within the movement, this imaginary, based on the belief that all of humanity must hear the gospel before Christ's return and that only believers will be rescued from the apocalypse has become a pretext for the activist shaping of politics and culture to form a more Godly nation.

The Christian Right, a vocal subset of White traditionalist evangelicals and Catholics rose in influence from the late 1970s, forming partisan organisations such as The Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council to promote conservative moral reform in response to the perceived secularisation of culture. A sense of moral outrage at progressive cultural and political shifts combined with the Republican recognition that evangelicals formed a significant voting bloc cemented an entanglement between Church and state. Rather than dissipating in response to the shifts of modernity, the Christian Right has become a movement that defines itself in a fight with pluralism in an ongoing series of 'culture wars',⁵⁵⁰ causing it to thrive in its sense of embattlement. A sense of exceptionalism is perpetuated, where nationhood and religious identity combine into an imaginary of a 'city upon a hill',⁵⁵¹ a beacon of hope in acting as an exemplar of moral and religious authority to the rest of the world.⁵⁵² In the drive to define itself in relation to a perceived enemy, evangelical defence of White traditional America has become conflated with the Christian position. Pluralism (for the Christian Right, a slide into ungodly/ unamerican values) is viewed as one of a number of signs of the End Times, but other ideological forces come into play to make this a defining target for an urgent war against 'anti-Christian' forces.

Imaginations of inclusion and exclusion, of believer and non-believer, materialise repeatedly within evangelical culture. Late Southern Baptist pastor and one of the most powerful propagandists of the Christian Right Tim LaHaye has opined: 'It is no overstatement to declare that most of today's evils can be traced to secular humanism.'⁵⁵³ Along with prolific author Jerry Jenkins, LaHaye authored a best-selling series of sixteen novels titled *Left Behind*.⁵⁵⁴ LaHaye and Jenkins took details of the rapture from Revelations (where true believers are taken up into heaven, leaving behind nominal Christians and unbelievers) and extrapolated them into a gruesome and visceral imagining of the last days. In the 'Left Behind' novels, the antichrist is in league with the United Nations, the European Union, Russia, Iraq, all Muslims, the media, liberals, freethinkers and international bankers. America is viewed as overtaken by secretive and immoral forces behind organisations that seem democratic. This enacts a reversal in which 'others' are seen to be intent on world domination, creating a logic for militant repression.⁵⁵⁵ The series is the most popular Christian fiction of the past fifty years, selling an

⁵⁵⁰ 'Culture war' describes the institutional battle between the two cultures of progressive secularisation and 'orthodoxy' (the ideology of traditional American values) over debates such as abortion, education, gay rights, gun laws etc. See more in Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.

⁵⁵¹ Extrapolated from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, it is used in an American political context to frame America as a beacon of hope to the world.

⁵⁵² Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided*, 7.

⁵⁵³ Tim LaHaye and David Noebel, *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millennium* (Nashville, TN: Word, 2000), 35

⁵⁵⁴ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2011).

⁵⁵⁵ The novels were also turned into a film *Left Behind* (2000), and a violent video game series beginning with *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (2006) in which gamers kill the unsaved and the army of the Antichrist on the streets of New York. See: Vic Sarin, *Left Behind: The Movie*,

estimated eighty million copies with seven books taking the number one spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Stevenson notes that through their stylistic and structural rhythms, fast pace and use of familiar tropes: ‘the books are page-turners, largely because these well-worn devices invite readers into a familiar rhythmic encounter with which they can immediately and easily engage.’⁵⁵⁶

Angela Denker, author of ‘Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump,’ described in a recent ‘Exvangelicals’ podcast the Christian nationalism she encountered in Texas. Denker noted that it varied according to church and region in its intensity, but broadly the culture reflected values of: ‘love the flag, support the military.’ Denker states that within Texas there prevails:

...this idea that America holds a status as the promised land in an analogous way to Israel holding a status as the promised land and so there is this sense of (the) manifest destiny of Christians. There is an apocalyptic theology that the end of the world is right around the corner and so that introduces a lot of fear into American politics, especially for American Christians growing up under this theology.⁵⁵⁷

A range of factors are identifiable in White evangelical support for Trump, not least his support for socially conservative measures that ally with the values of the Christian Right, cemented into America’s future through

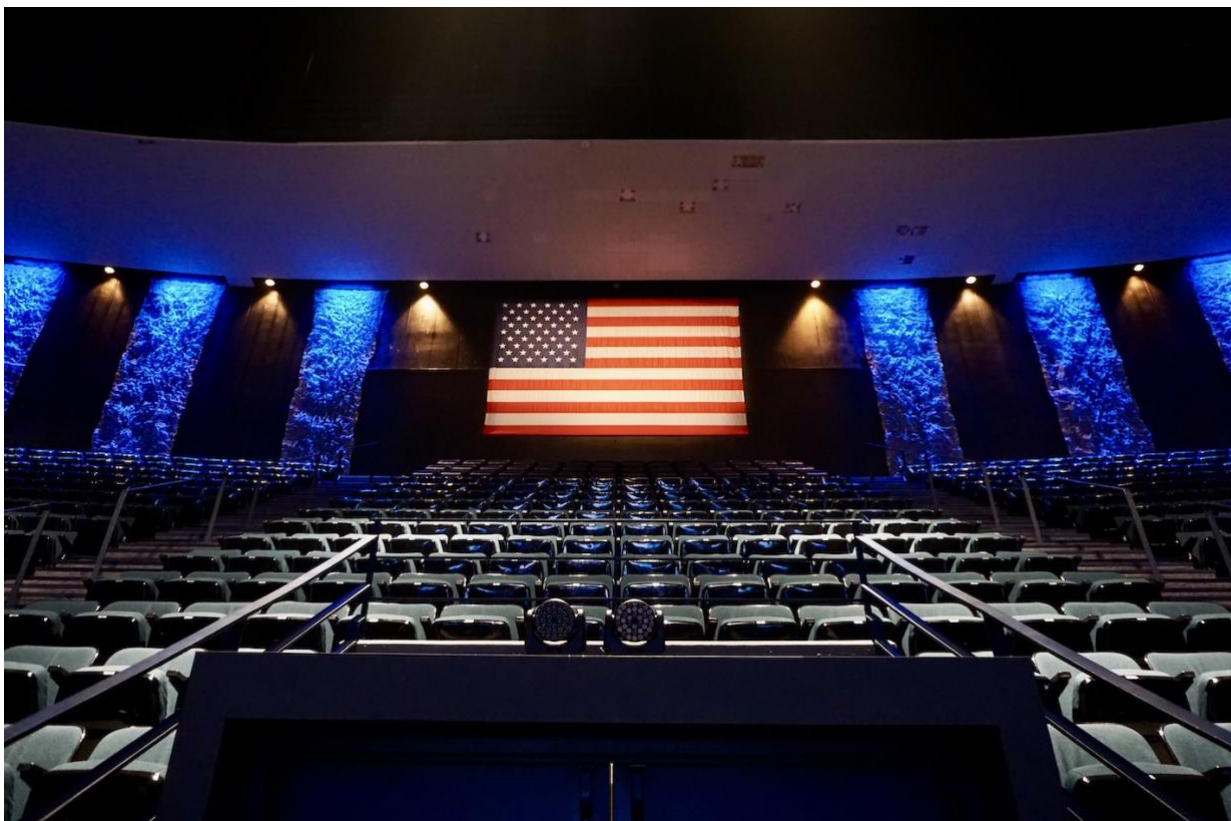


Fig. 33. US flag at the back of the Sanctuary, Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

Cloud Ten Pictures and Namesake Entertainment, 2000; Inspired Media Entertainment, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, Inspired Media Entertainment, Microsoft Windows, 2006.

⁵⁵⁶ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 33.

⁵⁵⁷ ‘Angela Denker,’ Exvangelical Podcast, accessed 5th July 2022, <https://anchor.fm/exvangelical/episodes/Angela-Denker-ch59pu>.

the appointment of three conservative (Catholic, Christian Right) supreme court justices who are currently scuppering Joe Biden's 'climate presidency' along with other anti- progressive rulings.⁵⁵⁸ Trump's support for Israel additionally aligns with White evangelical values who believe Jesus return will occur in Jerusalem.⁵⁵⁹

The perceived destabilisation of the 'Christian' American way of life produces a sense of threat and a fear of the other, creating both a collective nationalistic identity and increasingly militant behaviour. Whitehead and Perry write that Christian nationalism is: 'a cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.'⁵⁶⁰ It is further delineated from White conservative Protestantism as: 'it includes assumptions of nativism, White supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious.'⁵⁶¹ In a large-scale sociological study Whitehead and Perry quantify American attitudes towards Christian nationalism into four categories: Rejecters, Resisters, Accommodators and Ambassadors. Ambassadors are categorised as being 'wholly supportive' of Christian nationalism and believe that Christians should urgently act to hasten the 'glory' of the new heaven and earth.⁵⁶² According to the study they comprise 19.8% of the population.⁵⁶³ Whilst nationalistic views are not held by all evangelicals, Chris Hedges argues that conservative evangelical churches like Lakewood enable its growing influence in US politics by failing to call out what he terms an 'American fascism'—the idea that 'there is only one way to be a Christian and one way to be an American'⁵⁶⁴—and presents an ever-growing threat to democracy, freedom and tolerance. Hedges writes:

As long as scripture, blessed and accepted by the church, teaches that at the end of time there will be a Day of Wrath and Christians will control the shattered remnants of a world cleansed through violence and war, as long as it teaches that all nonbelievers will be tormented, destroyed and banished to hell, it will be hard to thwart the message of radical apocalyptic preachers.⁵⁶⁵

As a church within Scott Thumma and Dave Travis's 'seeker' category of megachurch,⁵⁶⁶ representing those tailored to the unchurched, especially those alienated by traditional organized religion, I propose that whilst Lakewood does not overtly embody a politicised nationalistic evangelicalism, it exists as a gateway into evangelical culture. It entangles with mainstream secular culture in numerous ways from its positive thinking, therapeutic ethos and its marketing and technological proficiency. It is the soft sell of evangelicalism, where dark messages such as the end of the world have, until recently, been avoided. However, Lisa Osteen Comes

⁵⁵⁸ Oliver Milman, 'Global dismay as supreme court ruling leaves Biden's climate policy in tatters,' *The Guardian*, accessed 11th July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/06/supreme-court-epa-ruling-biden-climate-policy-global-reaction>.

⁵⁵⁹ The majority of evangelicals believe that they cannot hasten the End Times through action, and so the idea that it is an attempt to bring about the return of Christ is likely mistaken. See: Owen Amos, 'Why do US evangelicals support Trump's Jerusalem policy?' *BBC News*, accessed 5th July 2022,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-42402350>.

⁵⁶⁰ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 10.

⁵⁶¹ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 10.

⁵⁶² Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 25-26.

⁵⁶³ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 35.

⁵⁶⁴ Hedges, *American Fascists*, 6.

⁵⁶⁵ Hedges, *American Fascists*, 7.

⁵⁶⁶ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 39-40.

series 'Facing the Future Without Fear: Signs of the End Times' (March 2022) demonstrates not only Lakewood's evangelical adherence to Biblical literalism (a 2017 Pew Research survey showed that of the 71% of Americans who consider themselves Christians, 39% of these take the Bible literally)⁵⁶⁷ but also the influence of the wider context of evangelical eschatology. Whilst Osteen Comes states that we will not know when Jesus will return, she also warns believers to be ready because the signs of the end times are increasingly present: 'although we do not know the time...we have to be prepared because he will come quickly.' Song lyrics at Lakewood include: 'He's coming on the clouds, Kings and Kingdoms will bow down...For who can stop the Lord Almighty...Every knee will bow before Him.' And 'Lift up your eyes, see the King has come.'

Osteen Comes repeatedly exhorts believers not to be afraid, even though things are going to get worse, reassuring them that Jesus will rescue the church: 'Jesus is going to snatch us away to heaven during the rapture.' Her repeat emphasis on not being afraid signals the terror that such a scenario might produce for believers, especially those with non-believing loved ones. Along with outlining seven signs that the end of the world is drawing near as prophesied in the New Testament books of Matthew, Luke and Revelations, Osteen Comes repeatedly assures believers that nothing bad will befall them: 'God promises that our path is going to get brighter and brighter, so we have nothing to fear.'

Signs of the return of Jesus, according to the Osteen Comes interpretation of scripture, include an increase in the spirit of deception, wars, famines, earthquakes and plagues. There will also be persecution and hate for Christians, a lack of godly living on earth, and a falling away (loss of faith) of believers. Osteen Comes states that once the gospel has been preached in all the world, Jesus will return and take all believers up into heaven with him ('After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.' 1 Thes. 4: 17, NIV), leaving behind the non-believers who have been blinded to the truth by the lies of the devil, and who will face the seven year tribulation whilst believers celebrate in heaven at the marriage supper of the lamb. She states that: 'This is the sad part... millions of people will be left behind...there will be no escape.' Osteen Comes asks: 'Can you imagine the earth without Godly influence? The church will be gone...wickedness will prevail on the earth...but we will be celebrating in heaven.' Creating a picture of ultimate victory, she explains that after the seven year period, Jesus will return again to earth with his church and they will reign together for a 'millennial reign' of a thousand years after which Jesus will overthrow Satan during the battle of Armageddon. Following the millennial reign, the church will spend eternity with Jesus in the New Jerusalem.

In her message, there is a strong emphasis on a distinction between the believer and the non-believer, and between truth accessible by being 'grounded in God's word' and the lies of Satan who confuses and mislead those who don't believe. There is little mention of concrete events or examples beyond 9/11 and war in the middle east, of climate change or of a need to actively address concerns beyond living a holy life, trusting in God and sharing your light with the world. Echoing the White colonial imaginary of American evangelicalism at

⁵⁶⁷ A.W. Geiger, '5 facts on how Americans view the Bible and other religious texts,' Pew Research Center, accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/>.

large, Osteen Comes states: ‘the good news is we are not of this world...the gates of hell shall not prevail against us...we’re the light of the world...we’re that city on a hill and we offer hope to the world.’⁵⁶⁸

The evangelical imaginary of the world as ultimately destined for divine destruction and renewal has impacted attitudes toward the apocalyptic scenarios of climate change, with scepticism, denial and apathy toward environmental crisis largely comprising the evangelical response. A 2015 Pew Research Centre poll found that only 28% of White evangelicals believe the earth is warming due to human activity in comparison to 64% of the non-religiously affiliated.⁵⁶⁹ As Globus Veldeman outlines, the Christian Right’s theological framing of climate change as a hoax made up by liberals has increased scepticism.⁵⁷⁰ For example, the Christian radio programme Crosstalk has hosted a number of guests who prod at the ‘pseudo-science’ behind climate change, question environmental activism and policy as a radical left wing conspiracy and increasingly frame environmental concern as an anti-Christian position. One interviewee traced the philosophical roots of environmentalism back to Nazism. In a debate on the 2021 Texas power outage, the Green New Deal and Biden backing the Paris Climate Accord, guest Tom DeWeese, president of the American Policy Centre, argued that the Green New Deal is part of a communist agenda, a cover for Democrats exerting political control.⁵⁷¹

Several of Crosstalk’s former interviewees are involved in the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, a conservative Christian policy group that actively works to promote climate science scepticism and to lobby against Christian environmentalism. Their ‘Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming’, signed by 500 prominent evangelical leaders, frames global warming as part of naturally occurring cycles.⁵⁷² The Alliance argues that to take steps to address this would increase poverty, a persuasive claim for Christians charged by the Bible to feed and clothe the poor. The Cornwall Alliance’s twelve part film series featuring a number of influential evangelical leaders, titled *Resisting the Green Dragon: A Biblical Response to One of the Greatest Deceptions of our Day* (2013), similarly frames climate activism as anti-Christian.⁵⁷³ In 2012 in a Crosstalk interview with Oklahoman Senator and businessman James Mountain Inhofe, Inhofe states: ‘God’s still up there. The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous.’⁵⁷⁴ Inhofe, in his role as Environment and Public Works Chairman in 2003, stated in Senate that ‘manmade global

⁵⁶⁸ Lisa Osteen Comes, ‘Facing the Future Without Fear’ <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/March/2022-03-09-1930-lisaosteencomes>.

⁵⁶⁹ “Religion and Views on Climate and Energy Issues” *Pew Research Centre*, accessed on 16th September 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues/>.

⁵⁷⁰ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 3; see also Adrian Bardon, ‘Faith and Politics Mix to Drive Evangelical Christians’ Climate Change Denial’ *The Conversation*, accessed 20 September 2021, <https://theconversation.com/faith-and-politics-mix-to-drive-evangelical-christians-climate-change-denial-143145>.

⁵⁷¹ Tom De Weese, “Texas Power, Green New Deal, Paris Climate Accord & Agenda 2030”, interview by Jim Schneider. *Crosstalk*, February 23, 2021, audio, <https://www.vcyamerica.org/crosstalk/2021/02/23/texas-power-green-new-deal-paris-climate-accord-agenda-2030/>.

⁵⁷² “An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming”, Cornwall Alliance, accessed 3rd Dec 2021, <https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/>; “Prominent Signers of “An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming”, Cornwall Alliance, accessed 3rd Dec 2021, <https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/signers-of-an-evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/>.

⁵⁷³ Cornwall Alliance, *Resisting the Green Dragon: A Biblical Response to One of the Greatest Deceptions of our Day*, Jax Distribution and CDR Communications, 2013.

⁵⁷⁴ James Inhofe, “The Greatest Hoax”, interview by Vic Eliason. *Crosstalk*, March 7, 2012, audio, <https://www.vcyamerica.org/crosstalk/2012/03/07/the-greatest-hoax/>.

warming is the greatest ever hoax perpetrated on the American people.⁵⁷⁵ Such views, aired by those in positions of authority and disseminated by the evangelical media, have gained increasing traction within White evangelical communities.⁵⁷⁶ Environmentalists are now considered an ‘out-group’ against which evangelicals favourably contrast themselves.⁵⁷⁷

In Globus Veldman’s study of traditionalist evangelical laity attitudes to climate change in Georgia, she largely dismisses the long-held view that evangelical rejection of climate change is due to what she terms the ‘end-time apathy’ hypothesis: the idea that due to the imminent return of Christ and destruction of the world evangelicals care little about the environment.⁵⁷⁸ Some of her participants were convinced that apocalypse was nigh and readily viewed climate change as evidence of this fact. These ‘hot millennialists’ however were in the minority. The majority, ‘cool millennialists,’ were predominantly climate sceptics who believed that the timing of the end could not be predicted. Highlighting climate change as another battleground in the war on secular culture, Globus Veldman writes:

For these individuals, climate change was ... instead a hoax—a competing eschatology concocted by secularists who sought to scare people into turning to government instead of God ... this *sense of embattlement with secular culture* explained why so many of my informants rejected climate change on religious grounds.⁵⁷⁹

Key to this scepticism is, for Globus Veldman, the outsize influence of Christian Right leadership through the evangelical mass media, impacting millions of global evangelical Christians. In framing climate change theologically, they ‘helped transform climate skepticism and denial from a political opinion into an aspect of evangelical identity.’⁵⁸⁰ This study is significant in highlighting the responsibility of powerful, typically White, religious men in shaping belief and action through a deliberate campaign of misinformation with potentially dire consequences.

However, Sophie Bjork-James’ ethnographic study of evangelical attitudes in Colorado foregrounds how competing understandings of the End Times produce different responses within evangelicalism and appears to lend some weight to the ‘end-times apathy’ hypothesis. Bjork-James writes that:

In over a year of ethnographic research on evangelicalism ... I found the future is ever-present in evangelical discourse. Believers regularly speculate and debate about the end of time—what it will entail, when it will occur, how to tell that it is coming. It is the subject of countless books, podcasts, radio broadcasts, sermons, Bible study groups, and informal conjecture.⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁵ James Inhofe “The Science of Climate Change”, (Congressional Record Volume 149, Number 113 (Monday, July 28, 2003)) Congressional Record Online, Government Publishing Office, accessed 21st January 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2003-07-28/html/CREC-2003-07-28-pt1-PgS10012.htm>.

⁵⁷⁶ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 3.

⁵⁷⁷ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 115.

⁵⁷⁸ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 26; See also Lynn White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,’ *Science Journal*, Vol. 155, Issue 3767, (March 1967): 1203-1207 <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203> for a controversial paper that set out the reasons why: ‘especially in its’ Western form Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.’ (Lynn White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots,’ 1205).

⁵⁷⁹ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 8.

⁵⁸⁰ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 11.

⁵⁸¹ Sophie Bjork-James, ‘Lifeboat Theology: White Evangelicalism, Apocalyptic Chronotopes, and Environmental Politics.’ *Ethnos*, (1 November 2020): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2020.1839527>.

Bjork-James outlines two distinct approaches amongst the evangelicals she researched in Colorado, one she frames as 'lifeboat' theology – the idea that God will completely destroy the earth and usher in a new heaven. This predominating viewpoint of a 'redundant earth' was more focussed on individual salvation and might be compared with Globus Veldman's 'hot millennialist' group in their excitement at the prospect of an imminent new beginning. Bjork-James writes about this inherently anthropocentric orientation, away from a failing planet, towards a God that will rescue them:

In this view, God is the ultimate agent (see Bjork-James 2018), and humans are seen as occupying a privileged position vis-à-vis God. This understanding is central to evangelical views on the environment, for human life is always the foreground in this ethical order, everything else is background. Human life is the important cargo on this sinking ship of a planet, not the quality of life, but the fact of life. The environment here remains the unmarked background.⁵⁸²

A 2014 study of how religious belief impacted attitudes to a range of environmental issues found that both Muslims and Christians had relatively low perceptions of urgency on climate change as a result of belief in divine intervention and life after death. Whilst noting the diversity of Christian environmental values in general, and the importance of the commandment to love one another, the 'other' was only defined in human terms: 'Christian participants...demonstrated anthropocentric values and evaluated environmental issues and technological solutions in relation to the extent to which they supported human welfare.' Likewise, Globus Veldman found that the majority of evangelicals in her study, whilst recognising that they should be good stewards of the environment, rejected the view that harming it was sinful. She also found that environmental problems were not noticed or considered important for this group.⁵⁸³ In the 2014 study, contrasting with the religious worldview, secular participants: 'strongly rejected the assertions of dominance over nature...seeing human-beings as animals that had "co-evolved" with other species and arguing that "rights" were not God-given but rather societal constructs.'⁵⁸⁴ In Bjork-James' study, a different interpretation of the Biblical text led to the belief that an apocalypse will remake the earth rather than destroy it. This minority view, whilst not exactly dismantling human/ non-human hierarchies, fits within the traditional 'stewardship of the earth' theology ('The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.' Psa. 24:1, NIV). It was more common amongst younger evangelicals, produced a greater likelihood of adherents' involvement in environmental causes.⁵⁸⁵

This evangelical perspective of a divide between nature and culture might be contrasted with Indigenous ontologies, as highlighted by anthropologists Phillippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Their work combines with feminist new materialist writing that similarly urges us to rethink our binary separations, and reconsider how the human exists in a web of relations with an agentic more-than-human world.⁵⁸⁶ Descola,

⁵⁸² Bjork-James, 'Lifeboat Theology', 17.

⁵⁸³ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, 116-117.

⁵⁸⁴ Aimee L.B. Hope & Christopher R. Jones, 'The impact of religious faith on attitudes to environmental issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies: A mixed methods study,' *Technology in Society*, Vol. 38, (August 2014): 48-59, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160791X14000177?via%3Dihub>.

⁵⁸⁵ Bjork-James, 'Lifeboat Theology,' 16.

⁵⁸⁶ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 2013; Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 1999 et al.

drawing on the history of Euro-American intellectual and scientific developments, highlights how ‘nature’ became a construction to differentiate between the human as superior and the non-human as less valuable: ‘nature ceased to be a unifying arrangement of things, however disparate, and became a domain of objects that were subject to autonomous laws that formed a background against which the arbitrariness of human activities could exert its many-faceted fascination.’⁵⁸⁷ Descola reminds us that these differentiations do not lie in the things themselves, but arise from our mediation and spatialisation of them.⁵⁸⁸ Both Descola and Viveiros de Castro have detailed the ways in which Indigenous people have a world-view of interdependence and connection with the more-than-human world, with no concept of ‘nature’ as an undifferentiated backdrop to human activity. Viveiros de Castro writes of the almost universal Amerindian notion of an original state of undifferentiation between humans and animals, described in myths which: ‘are filled with beings whose form, name and behaviour inextricably mix human and animal attributes in a common context of intercommunicability, identical to that which defines the present-day intra-human world.’⁵⁸⁹ He outlines how for Amerindians everything is connected by a common humanity, some aspects of which have been lost by animals (animals are ex-humans, not humans ex-animals). A ‘multinaturalism’ of bodies creates a cosmology of natures.⁵⁹⁰ Likewise, Descola states: ‘in that the category of “persons” includes spirits, plants, and animals, all of which are endowed with a soul, this cosmology does not discriminate between human beings and nonhuman beings.’⁵⁹¹ Deborah Bird Rose points out how this is also true for Aboriginal Elders, for whom the Earth itself and everything in it is: ‘all cultural...an entangled matrix of multispecies situatedness.’⁵⁹²

However, the White western hierarchy of man over nature is maintained within an evangelicalism that looks up to a male, human-like but powerful God as a transcendent, celestial figure. In addition to the ‘redundant earth’ response of evangelicals to scientific research proving anthropogenic climate change, the idea that humans have the power to disrupt the environment was also seen as arrogant in Bjork-James’ research (an idea echoed in Globus Veldman’s study), a challenge to the hierarchies of evangelicalism and a denial of God’s omnipotence.⁵⁹³

The framing of the more-than-human world at Lakewood is problematic. The material world is imagined as an inert resource for human gratification only, waiting to be electrified only by God’s divine power. An imagined separation exists. Liveliness is centred entirely in the human encounter with the divine and a less lively world outside exists. Anything that escapes the bounds of evangelicalism is viewed as either an unimportant backdrop to the more important business of a salvation that only includes the human, or a potential threat to God’s sovereignty which will always fail against God’s omnipotence. The human is narrated as exceptional in relation to other forms of life, rather than co-dependent and co-constitutive. The world is imaged as a temporary and

⁵⁸⁷ Philippe Descola and Marshall Sahlins, trans. Janet Lloyd, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, (Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), preface – xv.

⁵⁸⁸ Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 77.

⁵⁸⁹ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 471 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.

⁵⁹⁰ Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis,” 471.

⁵⁹¹ Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, 6.

⁵⁹² Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*, Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 100.

⁵⁹³ Bjork-James, ‘Lifeboat Theology,’ 18.

shadowy version of a more glorious world in waiting, impacting on engagement with and preparedness for climate crisis.

In the second part of the 'Facing the Future Without Fear' series, titled 'The Rapture of the Church', Osteen Comes repeatedly underlines the world as temporary and believers true citizenship being in heaven: 'We're aliens on this earth. This earth is not really our permanent home, we're just passing through. And on earth, our life is short like a vapour, the Bible says. But heaven will be for all eternity. We have to keep that in mind... We must maintain an eternal perspective.' Osteen Comes frames believers as 'aliens' (based on the Biblical passage 'Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers in this world...' 1 Pet. 2:11, AMP), at odds with the disbelieving world around them, aliens who cannot take anything with them into the world to come, *other than the people they might rescue*. Again, the anthropocentric bias of this framing reflects Bjork-James conclusions on the human as separate and exceptional within evangelicalism, above and beyond any other life form or part of the world. In an echo of Bjork-James' lifeboat theology, Osteen Comes declares: 'God is warning people today. He is saying: 'Get in the ark! Receive Jesus as your Lord and saviour! Get in the church and you will be safe! Aren't you glad you're in Christ?' Later, paradoxically encouraging fear, she repeats: 'Obeying God is my place of safety.'

Beyond the directly eschatological message of Osteen Comes series, repeated allusions to God as a stable ground and a rescuer foreground the divine protection of the Sanctuary as a sacred lifeboat from the threat of stormy seas also overlap with Bjork-James' lifeboat metaphor. At the start of a recent service, a polished looking Victoria Osteen opened by asking the congregation if they sometimes feel like God isn't present. She deployed scripture to counter doubt with the story of Jesus being woken by his disciples to supernaturally calm the storm they are swept up in:

In those storms of life we wonder where are you God? You need to show up sooner than later! You know the story about the disciples in the boat when they were with Jesus and the storm kicked up and it was thrashing the boat back and forth and Jesus was asleep in the boat! You know they thought... 'where did you go Jesus? Have you ever felt like he is asleep in your boat? But do you know what they did? They called out to him. They said: 'Jesus, wake up!' And he woke up and calmed the storm. Can I tell you today, if you feel like Jesus is asleep in your boat, call out to Him with a heart of faith... God is your refuge and strength.⁵⁹⁴

Watery, oceanic metaphors in the song lyrics underline the historical symbol of the church as a ship navigating the shifting, dangerous waters of life: 'Let faith be the song that overcomes the raging sea, let faith be the song that calms the storm inside of me', and: 'You call me out upon the waters... In oceans deep, My faith will stand...'⁵⁹⁵ The church is repeatedly imaged as an ark, a place of sanctuary and survival. Furthermore — echoing the beliefs of Globus Veldman and Bjork-James' participants — the ecological imaginary at Lakewood reflects the evangelical belief in the omnipotence of God. To doubt in God's ability to save the church, to worry about the future is to demonstrate a lack of faith. Believers are encouraged not to surrender to fear despite material

⁵⁹⁴ Victoria Osteen, 'Seeing Beyond the Logical,' Lakewood Church Service Introductory message, Sunday April 3rd 2022, accessed 8th June 2022, available at: <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>.

⁵⁹⁵ Matt Redman, "We Praise You", 2020, Track #2, *Let There Be Wonder*, Integrity Music, 2020; and Hillsong United, "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)", 2013, Track #4, *Zion*, Hillsong, 2013.

realities. God rescues both in this current life and in the apocalypse to come. Simple phrases encourage belief in divine intervention despite life's uncertainties. These are repeatedly reinforced through multiple texts of teaching, preaching, authoring, song lyrics, social media, radio transmissions, podcasts and interviews, soothingly narrating Godly intervention and protection in a hurricane and flooding vulnerable locality.

In his work on atmospheres and staging, Böhme draws on Schmitz's theorisation of the staging of German National Socialist rallies as 'Eindruckstechnik' – the technique of implanting impressions into people, of manipulating via advertising, staging and broadcasting mass events.⁵⁹⁶ Recalling the lighting at Lakewood, Böhme's description of lighting in concert with other devices, works through this technique:

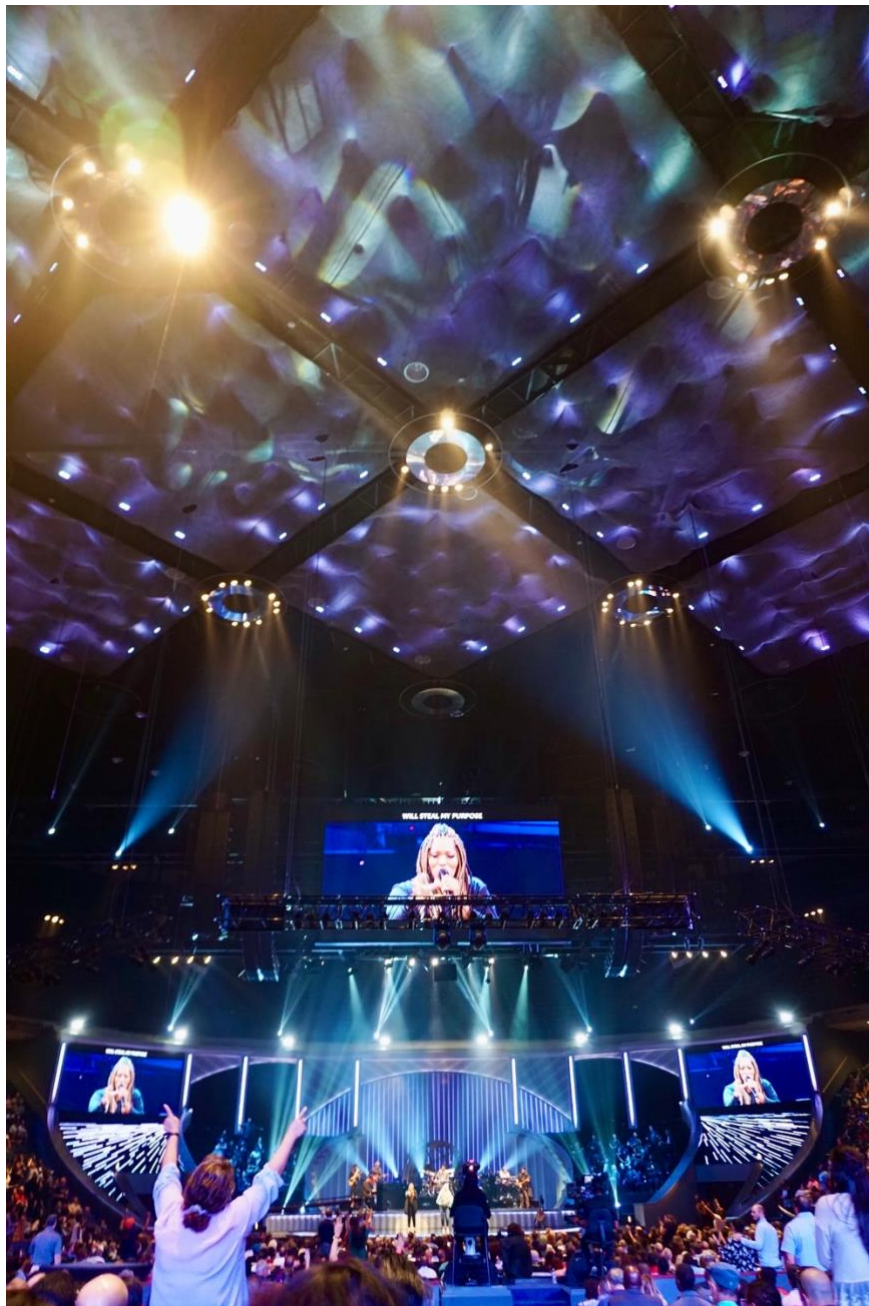


Fig. 34. Lakewood Church worship service, Houston, Texas, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

⁵⁹⁶ Gernot Böhme, 'Nazi architecture as design for producing "Volksgemeinschaft"' in Trigg, Dylan, (ed.) *Atmospheres and Shared Emotions*. (Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 152-161.

A space of light was produced using projectors from the anti-aircraft troops, and those domes of light horizontally defined the inner circle of the mass meeting while vertically opening it towards the endless space. That way, the known effect of Gothic domes pulling spectators upwards was intensified incredibly by a feeling of us here assembled against a dark and hostile world outside. This feeling of a bright us here and a threatening, dark other outside, should save edification and with it the mobilisation to be ready for defence—and later for attack.⁵⁹⁷

This description demonstrates how lighting (in combination with other narrative texts at Lakewood) cements a sense of inside and out, of protection and threat. But at Lakewood, this sense of exclusion and threat is instrumentalised toward those who refuse to believe and participate in ‘Godly’ American living. Böhme details how NSDAP rallies produced religious emotion, intensified by a sense of expectation. The events created and increased a desire for community, for pride, for enthusiasm, producing feelings of love, identification and loyalty. These rallies met those desires through: ‘a meaningful environment to which individual persons could feel a sense of belonging.’⁵⁹⁸ He points out that the strategies of political aesthetics, of marketing, public relations and use of the media deployed by Nazism were modern and are still used in policy making today as communication design,⁵⁹⁹ the same strategies that are used by churches like Lakewood. Böhme states that whilst the crimes of Nazism have been well covered, what is still suppressed is: ‘the fact that a large proportion of German population supported the regime, that people invested their hopes into the movement, their enthusiasm, their love, and what they called idealism at the time.’⁶⁰⁰ That the outcome of Nazism proved to be war is an irony not lost in a contemporary moment when White Christian nationalists marched on Capitol Hill in an attempt to overturn the outcome of a Presidential election they perceived had been stolen from them, risking their version of America. Whilst Lakewood does not replicate fascism in any overt way, it deploys totalisation in its visual and material culture in order to communicate a set of values that are not only religious but carry a nationalistic pride within them as well. It exists as the appealing face of a broader movement that contains within it deeply problematic beliefs and practices, distracting believers with imagined fears and threats of otherness, of non-belief, away from Lakewood’s contribution to actual societal and material crises.

The Osteen family are adept at narrating their story through the total artwork of the site. They found both a local and global community, a seemingly horizontal crowd based on a therapeutic and teleological narrative arc, but containing an implicit hierarchy. This multi-sensory, affectively repetitious entrainment in the story-world serves to embed a set of ideas and beliefs. Whilst individual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours may differ, through this narration a collective climate of belief is produced. In the site of the Sanctuary, the fabula of the Lakewood narrative forms into the fabulations of Lakewood’s imaginaries, creating a collective atmosphere. In Lakewood’s narrative, the world is always bending toward success for believers with a final victory at the end of time, where they will reign with Christ for eternity in a new heaven and earth. Conversion and rescue of human believers is of paramount importance. Nature is imagined a separate background that impassively waits for the divine to shape it toward believers hopes and dreams. Lakewood’s iteration of the evangelical narrative impacts on belief and behaviour within a locality that is increasingly impacted by severe weather events. Weather-world and story-

⁵⁹⁷ Böhme, ‘Nazi architecture as design for producing “Volksgemeinschaft,” 157.

⁵⁹⁸ Böhme, ‘Nazi architecture as design for producing “Volksgemeinschaft,” 154.

⁵⁹⁹ Böhme, ‘Nazi architecture as design for producing “Volksgemeinschaft,” 155.

⁶⁰⁰ Böhme, ‘Nazi architecture as design for producing “Volksgemeinschaft,” 155.

world cannot be separated. The relentless belief in positivity and the miraculous prevents adequate mitigation of and preparation for the increasingly dire consequences of the many overlapping crises produced by global warming, multi-species extinction, sea level rise, pollution and resource depletion. For now, refugees from climate crisis temporarily occupy Lakewood, but unless urgent action is taken, the site may be more permanently breached by a volatile climate and by the bodies that suffer within it.

Conclusion



Fig. 35. Houston skyline from the freeway, 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

In 1992, church leadership, administration and growth expert Lyle Schaller, using the metaphor of clouds on the horizon, outlined the eleven clouds, or challenges, that would come to megachurches like Lakewood, including poor facilities and inadequate parking, the need to purchase additional land to expand into, and the importance of design for a cheery ambiance and attractive atmosphere to keep people returning.⁶⁰¹ His prediction of more churches with sizable facilities did indeed come to pass as megachurches have continued to thrive and grow. This growth is driven by the ideologies and conditions of the wider paradigm shift toward global free-market capitalism, combining with the evangelical emphasis on world-wide conversion. It is possible that the ‘liquid’ disorientations of this shift into late capitalism:⁶⁰² the greater social alienation, increased wealth inequalities, the precarity of labour and speed and overwhelm of networked communication, has also increased

⁶⁰¹ Bratton, *ChurchScape*, 4-5.

⁶⁰² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

the perceived need for the orienting narratives of evangelicalism, for the imaginaries of belonging, comfort, order and progress.

However, Schaller failed to expand his attention beyond logistical and practical clouds for megachurches to literal ones. In August 2017, during my first year of research, Hurricane Harvey reportedly breached the bounds of Lakewood, three months after I'd written a script for a performance where a hurricane bears down upon Lakewood and floods the building to disorienting affect. Over the course of working on this PhD, four more significant hurricanes have hit Houston: Imelda, Laura, Beta and Nicholas. They have caused death (apart from Nicholas), destroying buildings and infrastructure and costing federal government huge expense. Research shows that human induced climate crisis is making hurricanes both more frequent and destructive.⁶⁰³ The spread and force of global capitalism, overwriting and excluding other ways to inhabit the world, is central to market driven resource depletion based on a belief in human exceptionalism. Concurrently, the advent of Trumpism has enabled the evangelicals of the Christian Right to attempt to once again shape the social, political and legal landscape, along with the evangelical response to ecological challenges.

Whilst I was writing a book chapter on Lakewood's atmospherics within a context of American evangelical obsession with the End Times, I found myself intermittently checking news updates on the progress of Hurricane Laura across the Gulf Coast from Louisiana to Texas, following the path of Hurricane Harvey three years prior.⁶⁰⁴ The category 4 hurricane was predicted to hit Houston, with residents being encouraged to evacuate. At the time, five tropical cyclones circulated over the Atlantic Ocean, this number occurring for only the second time in recorded history.⁶⁰⁵ In the event, Hurricane Laura diverted away from Houston, but killed over twenty people on the island of Hispaniola, twenty in Haiti, three in the Dominican Republic and progressed through Texas and Louisiana where fifteen more were killed. The hurricane created power failures, extensive flooding and destroyed over 600,000 homes and buildings. During the onslaught, a Facebook post from a fervent evangelical caught my eye. Her satellite image of storm Laura over the Atlantic was superimposed with a dark red stain and the words 'The Blood of Christ.' Her comment read:

People of God, are y'all speaking to Laura or what?! According to Genesis 1:26, we have dominion over the earth. Earth consists of land, air, water and life. We don't have to agree with the meteorologist, the NHC, or NOAA! I apply the Blood of Jesus to the states of Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Ohio, Tennessee & every state in between. By the name & authority of Jesus Christ, I command winds to rapidly decrease. Laura has been stripped of her power & has to become subject & must bow to the name of Jesus. There will not be catastrophic storm surges, damaging winds or torrential rains. You will not scatter into tornadoes. You will dissipate & will no longer be detectable on any radars. I declare the Lord is our refuge & fortress. He protects us, our children, families (immediate/extended) and friends, & sustains our

⁶⁰³ Jeff Berardelli, 'How climate change is making hurricanes more dangerous,' Yale Climate Connections, accessed 9th June 2022, <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/07/how-climate-change-is-making-hurricanes-more-dangerous/>.

⁶⁰⁴ Guardian staff and agencies, 'Hurricane Laura levels homes and causes deaths as one of US's strongest ever storms,' The Guardian, accessed 9th June 2022, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/28/hurricane-laura-deaths-destruction-us-strongest-ever-storm>.

⁶⁰⁵ Guardian staff and agencies, 'Five cyclones churn in Atlantic Ocean for only second time in history' The Guardian, accessed 9th June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/14/atlantic-bermuda-hurricane-tropical-storm-sally>.

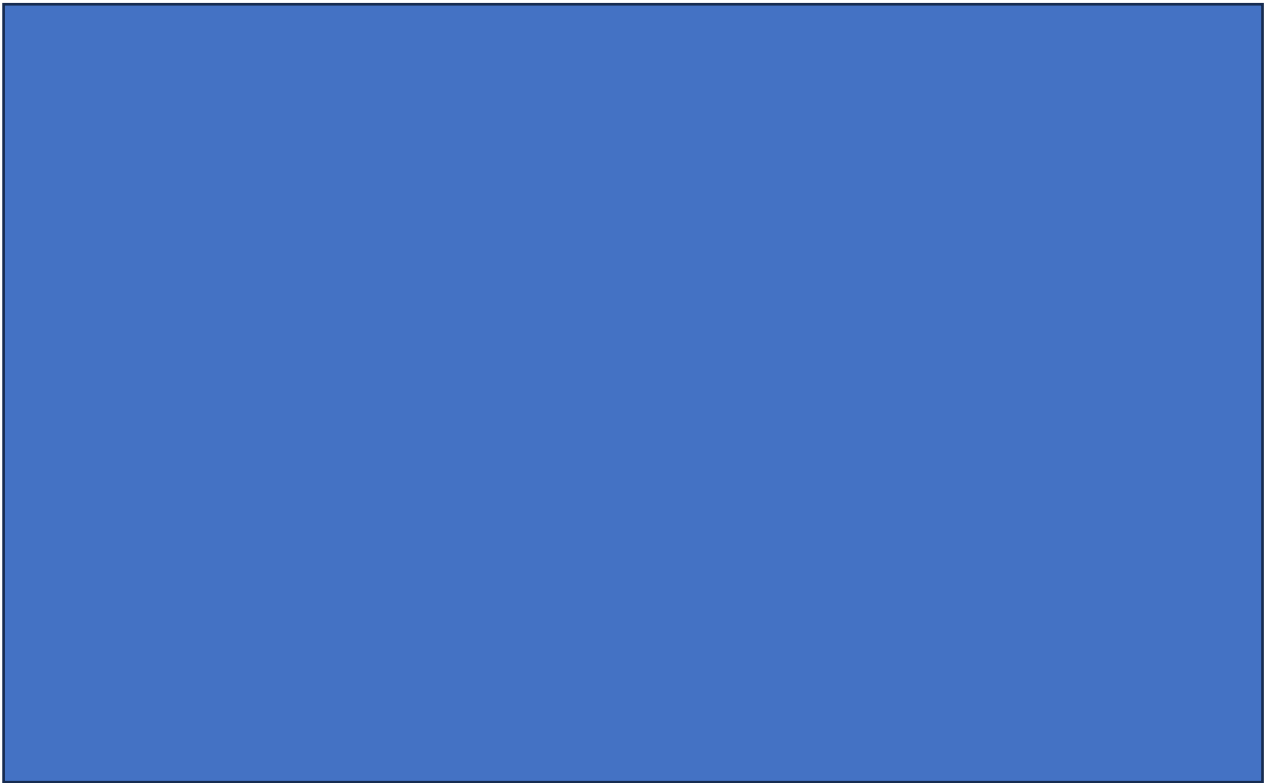


Fig. 36. Material removed due to copyright. (Ramona Lewis-Freeman, 'People of God, are y'all speaking to Laura or what?!,' Facebook, 26th August 2020, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3464309083592497&set=a.239139896109448>).

homes, businesses & possessions. The Lord is faithful. He will strengthen & protect us from evil.

Amen.⁶⁰⁶

Her intercessory prayer, vocalised through the channel of social media, demonstrates the imaginaries of safety and protection within the evangelical story-world. Around the same time, the Guardian reported on the close call of Pastor Steve Hinkle in Lake City, Arkansas. Despite the roof of his 'Refuge' church caving in and the destruction of other buildings onsite, Hinkle focused on the positive: "It skipped right over the house and hit every other building that the church has other than us... We're blessed."⁶⁰⁷ The certainty of these orientations, the effort of expressing positivity and rising above material circumstances, can prove deeply problematic in mitigating any sense of urgent action in relation to what matters. Hurricanes don't discriminate between believer and non-believer, but their impact is greater on the most vulnerable. It is likely that those who bore the greatest burdens of Hurricane Laura were those on once colonised islands and those without access to the resources for protecting themselves from its devastating effects. Recent scholarship has shown that not only do concern over property damage, limited mobility and lack of transport or shelter access impact on the inability to evacuate, but increasingly, it is misinformation directed through religious and political media channels. The uptake of science denialism has resulted in high stakes behaviour. Lack of evacuation is a politically partisan affair, with Republican voters notably less likely to evacuate. Conservative pundits and media outlets dismiss

⁶⁰⁶ Ramona Lewis-Freeman, 'People of God, are y'all speaking to Laura or what?!,' Facebook, 26th August 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3464309083592497&set=a.239139896109448>.

⁶⁰⁷ Quoted in Guardian staff and agencies, 'Hurricane Laura levels homes and causes deaths as one of US's strongest ever storms' The Guardian, accessed 9th June 2022, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/28/hurricane-laura-deaths-destruction-us-strongest-ever-storm>.

hurricane warnings as ‘fake news.’ Religious and political conservatism overlaps in North America in the Christian Right and evangelical media, who continue to propagate climate skepticism and environmentalism as an anti-Christian position. The continued politicization of climate crisis is producing life threatening inaction.⁶⁰⁸

The demands of a large city supporting six and a half million people and its industries poses a challenge to efforts to mitigate climate crisis and to shift toward more balanced, less destructive ways of living, to recognise human interdependence with more-than-human ecologies and climates. With such a huge following both in Houston and globally, the stakes of Lakewood’s climate of belief – how its story-world intersects with the meteorological climate - are high. The ecological metaphor and mimicry in the Sanctuary do not produce an engagement with or recognition of interdependence on the encompassing more-than-human world. Lakewood instead deploys them as a window on a transcendent God, set apart from a passive world that waits for His divine intervention. Metaphors of arks and oceanic rescue can be both productive, prompting believers to assist in relief efforts, but can also lead to complacency in relation to addressing human complicity in climate crisis. Despite the controversies over Lakewood’s response to the effects of severe weather, the church regularly offers its’ own rescue, assisting displaced and affected Houstonians, opening the building for shelter and providing beds, blankets, food and supplies.⁶⁰⁹ However, its outreach programmes will have to accelerate and expand as it continues to act only on the effects of climate crisis whilst continuing to participate in the ever intensifying causes of suffering. Whilst the IPCC states that reduction of the risks posed by climate change: ‘requires urgent, more ambitious and accelerated action and, at the same time, rapid and deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions,’⁶¹⁰ fossil fuel companies continue to invest in new developments threatening ecological and human devastation. As Globus Veldman has outlined, there is a clear link between the funding of supportive scientists by the fossil fuel and manufacturing industries, and the promotion of climate change denial by business associations, conservative think tanks and the Christian Right. These interests all work together to create the ‘climate denial machine.’⁶¹¹ The eschatological obsession of some evangelicals (now overt at Lakewood through Osteen Comes recent message series) does nothing to turn believers attention toward the instabilities that White western privilege continues to contribute to. The belief that the church is a divine life boat, destined to sail into a glorious future, lessens the engagement with a world imagined as destined for destruction. Wealthy, influential belief shapers with platforms of power and resources at Lakewood hold beliefs that are seemingly non-political. But the religious narratives they espouse inform political ideas and engagement, and with them ecological ideas and engagement, within the evangelical community.

Joel Osteen’s focus on positive thinking, uncritically replicating the individualistic self-help industry that supports free market capitalism, fails to account for the structural inequalities caused by racist, patriarchal and ableist systems. Much like those Texan bodies seeking religious revival who laboured in the first oil fields at

⁶⁰⁸ Elisa F. Long, M. Keith Chen, and Ryne Rohla, ‘Political Storms: Emergent Partisan Skepticism of Hurricane Risks’, *Science Advances* 6, no. 37 (1 September 2020): eabb7906, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abb7906>.

⁶⁰⁹ Tom Dart. ‘Why Did America’s Biggest Megachurch Take so Long to Shelter Harvey Victims?’ *The Guardian*, accessed 11th November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/30/lakewood-church-joel-osteen-hurricane-harvey>.

⁶¹⁰ ‘FAQ1: What are the new insights on climate impacts, vulnerability and adaptation from IPCC?’, IPCC, accessed 9th June 2022, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/about/frequently-asked-questions/keyfaq1>.

⁶¹¹ Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Scepticism*, 104.

Spindletop and the slaves working the plantations before them, the legacy of colonialism extends into contemporary Black and Brown bodies in Houston who are sickened by the toxins in the earth, air and water, suffering from heat, drought and the precarity of the risk to home and stable employment through flooding and other environmental catastrophe. These bodies enter through the door of the Sanctuary seeking hope. The threat and unpredictability of liquid times, the ‘world-openness’ of which Berger speaks, causes those beset by trouble to reach for a ‘sacred canopy’: the protection of a meaningful story-world when all else looks fragile.⁶¹² The desire for a different story-world, an experience of acceptance and healing, and aspiration toward a better life for those made to suffer by racist town planning, where certain bodies occupy more risky, less ‘valuable’ land,⁶¹³ manifests in a complex cloud of affect in the site.

Osteen’s provocation that his message of hope is unassailable is crucial to maintain the coherence of the story-world. It reflects an American ideal of thinking positive whilst denying a more complex reality. But Osteen’s formulaic platitudes fall flat. The continued orchestration of an uncritical but seductively quasi-religious story-world undoes the purported, often repeated, aim to share God’s love. It is business as usual, and this business is extremely profitable and successful. Lakewood works to maintain a status quo in which some bodies are more protected, comfortable and successful than others. A myopia within the church, which against Osteen’s assertions that he doesn’t get involved in politics, fails to recognise that it is always already political, means that the recurrent expressions of love for their followers lacks any grit. His refusal to broach any subject deemed controversial in order to stick to the script, protects his brand - his message of hope - and protects an institution which is complicit in perpetuating the both the wider context of human exceptionalism and colonial capitalism. In this imaginary, the earth is both a passive background on which human activity plays out, and an unending, exploitable resource.

Whilst visiting Lakewood in July 2019 during the ‘60 years of Lakewood’ celebration, I asked Osteen what he envisioned the next sixty years of Lakewood might involve. Unsurprisingly for an evangelical megachurch leader, he replied he was excited about getting the message out to even more people via the use of new technological platforms. I then asked him to consider using his platform to address climate crisis, mentioning the vulnerability of Houston, explaining whilst standing on the swirling carpet, that the ground can no longer be trusted to hold. Looking visibly uncomfortable he exited the conversation, stating that other people on his team deal with this area of responsibility. My suggestion of inviting in evangelical Christian and atmospheric scientist and educator Professor Katharine Hayhoe from Texas Tech University was firmly but politely and prayerfully declined via email. Subsequent emails were not responded to.

⁶¹² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4-6.

⁶¹³ ‘Examining the effects of environmental inequity in Houston,’ Understanding Houston, accessed 9th June 2022, <https://www.understandinghouston.org/blog/examining-the-effects-of-environmental-racism-in-houston#:~:text=Environmental%20racism%20disproportionately%20harms%20communities,predominantly%20Black%20and%20Brown%20neighborhoods>.



Fig. 37. Meeting Joel Osteen, 3rd August 2019. (Image credit: Kate Pickering)

As George Marshall has highlighted, the human brain is adept at ignoring discomfiting truths about climate change, even when it is directly impacting us, even when it is destroying everything we own. For Marshall, the most prevalent narrative above all in relation to our reaction to climate change is the ‘collective social norm of silence’ linked uncomfortably to that other taboo, death.⁶¹⁴

Lakewood powerfully addresses the bodily need for belonging, progress, comfort and order. The story-world at Lakewood is potent. It communicates its narrative spectacularly, performatively and repetitively, embedding it into the bodies in the crowd. It is inflected by both religious meaning, capitalist logics and social and political conservatism. It materialises through imaginaries of outside and in, the correct order of God, man and world, the assurance that the church is travelling toward a victorious endpoint and that God wants us to increase and succeed. These imaginaries produce feelings of hope, belonging, fear and excitement. Body, word and world combine into an enclosing stability, a protective building made of believing bodies. The Osteen family, echoing evangelical imaginaries at large, encourage the believer not to be downhearted but to trust in God, for surely good things are coming, and the victory just needs to be believed and stepped into. However, the mirage of divine stability is fast disappearing and the ground beneath Houstonians feet no longer holds true. Storms,

⁶¹⁴ George Marshall, *Don't Even Think about It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, Paperback edition (London Oxford New York New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), 81-90.

subsidence and flooding create the disorientations of living in a present where deep pasts and deep futures contract into a fearful proximity with the bodies in the city. The disavowal of the body (the taboo of the desiring, leaky, wounded body that occurs within White evangelicalism) goes hand in hand with the disavowal of the more-than-human world on which the body depends. The catastrophic conditions of climate crisis, the breaching of Lakewood's literal and imagined separations from the 'outside,' might form the ultimate rupture that awakens the congregation out of their current immersion.

Human activity enmeshes with the weather, making and remaking it. In the global north, our consumption, our urban centres, our use of chemicals, our burning of fossil fuels combine to shift and destabilise weather patterns. But we can participate in this weather making differently, beginning with a shift in our imaginaries. Neimanis and Walker state that to reimagine ourselves as weather bodies is already a politics.⁶¹⁵ In perpetuating its imaginaries, Lakewood's leadership shores up its' institution strength, wealth and longevity, at the expense of a more democratic, liberating, imaginative way of being. However, the trans-corporeal, weathering body at Lakewood is one that is always in a shifting process of becoming, reciprocally influencing and being influenced by the world in a constant exchange of flows and forces. Whilst the imaginary that circulates within Lakewood's climate is one of a fixed set of beliefs with the believer on a journey to a predetermined outcome, lived reality is one of oscillation, of shimmer, of emergent but indeterminate belief that ebbs and flows.

The lively bodily oscillations that result from immersion in Lakewood's story-world, although they are instrumentalised in the church toward certain aims and ideas, in reality signal an indeterminacy that works against teleological endpoints and foreclosed outcomes. The fabrications of the megachurch have within them the capacity for imagining and materialising otherwise, if believers can disengage from the pleasurable spell of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk,' and take a more appraising look at their own embodiment as weather bodies, their identity and participation in an affective set of relations within the story-world.

Karen Barad states that her concept of intra-action – the reciprocity between different entities and actors, emphasising how we are all co-created by otherness – foregrounds 'a politics of possibilities,' 'ways of responsibly imagining and intervening in' our interconnectedness.⁶¹⁶ Re-thinking 'opens a political space of engagement.'⁶¹⁷ This responsibility is increased proportionally by power, wealth and White privilege. Rather than adopting and replicating existing power structures, Lakewood's boundaries must be breached with other story-worlds, beginning with the congregants own wounded weather bodies, story-worlds that are less dominant, less monopolising, that image a contingent, complex and differently oriented world. Boundaries do not only enclose, they also form a point of contact, of touching and exchange. A radical openness to otherness, those human and more-than-human bodies who cannot align within the orientations of Lakewood's story-world, is necessary.

⁶¹⁵ Neimanis and Walker, 'Weathering,' 15.

⁶¹⁶ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 246.

⁶¹⁷ Neimanis and Walker, 'Weathering,' 15.

Ahmed reflects this indeterminacy, proposing a ‘queer phenomenology,’ a queer orientation in which the world appears ‘slantwise.’⁶¹⁸ A queer phenomenology redirects our attention toward different objects: ‘those that are “less proximate” or even those that deviate or are deviant.’⁶¹⁹ Queer orientations mark new paths, deviations from the straight paths always followed. Ahmed writes of the attraction of deviating movements: ‘deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire...’⁶²⁰ Belief, in its emergent, indeterminate oscillation can shift with the changing milieu of the weather, its reinforcing acts performed and vocalised otherwise.

Through a turning away from fixed anchor points, from enclosure within a religious habitus that excludes all who cannot fit within its norms, dis/identification provides an opening up of possibility, a new route out of the tired imaginaries and institutions that fail to account for the multivalence of lived reality. Dis/identification offers a strategy, not only for me to navigate my way through this research, but also as a potential within Lakewood’s production of embodied oscillations. Rather than an oscillation between representation and presence that sustains the status quo, all that might be required is a shift within that perceptual multi-stability to look at the story-world of Lakewood askance, to see the giant high definition projections of ocean waves as a destabilised ecological reality that may breach Lakewood’s bounds, rather than an image of a powerful God in control of a mechanistic world. This might produce a different orientation within the Sanctuary, an oscillation that moves between story-world and more-than-human world, that breaks out of enclosure in the total work of art and leads to dis/identification. Whilst decolonial-ecological reorientation is required at an institutional level before disaster strikes and Black and Brown bodies are subjected once again to unequally experienced climate impacts, such ‘conversions’ or ‘epiphanies’ where climate sceptic evangelicals reevaluate their relationship to the more-than-human world are both possible and crucial to building a movement.⁶²¹

Marshall proposes the need for ‘conviction’ in the role of spreading the message of climate change, a lesson that climate activists can learn from preachers such as Osteen in how to mobilise crowds, in moving knowledge from the head to the heart, and even more importantly, from the heart to the hands in an ‘emotional-brain commitment to action.’⁶²² If understood as a sacred value, climate action can be the non-negotiable that causes people to make those short-term sacrifices that ensure a liveable planet. Climate change acceptance can be woven into religious practices and experiences, through socially held and supported belief. Perhaps church is the best place to bear witness to it and to deal with climate anxiety and grief, in the communities of sacred space where people have learned to do anything to protect their convictions, where inaction and silence are the moral equivalents of active sin.⁶²³

⁶¹⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 23.

⁶¹⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 3.

⁶²⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 20.

⁶²¹ Marshall, *Don’t Even Think about It*, 223.

⁶²² Marshall, *Don’t Even Think about It*, 215.

⁶²³ Marshall, *Don’t Even Think about It*, 224.

In my own practice, I have looked to fluidity and movement rather than fixity, particularly the disorientations of floating and the dislocations of oceanic imaginaries as ways to experience and image a shift into a different milieu. Inserting other, excluded imaginaries into the evangelical story-world begins to dissolve the imagined hermetic totalisation. Through this, the divine encounter is understood as embodied and the body as part of an encompassing more-than-human cosmos. It creates possibilities of survival, for working respectfully with and responsively within a shimmering, pulsing world.

Rather than a therapeutic and teleological story that bends towards the end point of apocalypse, feminist multi-species theorist Donna Haraway rejects the sublime and thrilling visions of destruction conjured by the apocalyptic imaginary – whether secular or religious.⁶²⁴ In *Staying with the Trouble*, her recent book on ways to think-with, live-with and be-with other inhabitants of the earth in troubling times, she offers the provocation of staying with the damaged earth on which we reside instead of endings in which we refuse responsibility. She proposes we build messy, difficult but liveable futures through human non-human collaborations. Haraway dismisses both hope and despair: the hopeful faith in easy technofixes that will rescue us from ongoing climate crises, and also the destructive fatalism that these horrors are insurmountable and that there is no sense in working towards a resurgent world. Without glossing over the dire realities of population increase and its burdens, Haraway argues that we eschew an abstract futurism and stay with the trouble, working with the non-human to collaborate and co-create, making ‘oddkin’ through strange and risky action. Central to this effort for Haraway is imaginative, speculative fabulation that conjures potential futures.⁶²⁵ Both Haraway and Bruno Latour posit orientations that might enable us to fiction, and therefore shape the world differently. Haraway rejects our sky gazing, where we look to a transcendent ‘sky god’ of the Anthropocene⁶²⁶ or another planet to decamp to, whilst Latour speaks of the ‘Earthbound’⁶²⁷ - those who face the earth, telling earthly (and also earthy) stories for its survival. On the ethical and ethnographical project of story-telling, one of the ‘great arts of witness,’⁶²⁸ Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose write:

Ethnographic storytelling is about the arts of becoming-witness, which include both attention to others and expression of that experience: to stand as witness and actively to bear witness. As we are seized, so we bear witness in order that others may be seized, telling stories that draw audiences into others’ lives in new and consequential ways, stories that cultivate the capacity for response.⁶²⁹

Story-telling provokes response, and responsibility. Speculative fictions, specifically, bear a relation to the future, creating space for new imaginaries to arise, challenging old, outmoded ways of thinking and being, an opening up of ‘what is yet-to-come’ - an ongoing-ness that might undermine individualism, imperialism and anthropocentrism. Poesis – the idea that language alters the world - doesn’t just imply imagining the future but an alteration of that future. Armen Avanessian writes that: ‘Speculative poetics is then, oriented toward the

⁶²⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3.

⁶²⁵ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3-4.

⁶²⁶ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 39.

⁶²⁷ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 248.

⁶²⁸ Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Lively Ethnography’, *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (1 May 2016): 91

<https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527731>.

⁶²⁹ Van Dooren & Rose, ‘Lively Ethnography’, 89.

future, alters our view of the past, and interacts with the present ... the literary takes on the task of creating a global, social and political present.⁶³⁰

My experimental writing seeks to explore if Lakewood can be imagined otherwise. Through an imaginative dissolution and watery immersion, the building-body strays into a dis/identificatory heterodoxy, it becomes queer and weird, messy and mutable. Here nothing is predetermined and there are no certain outcomes. I image Lakewood with no redemptive horizon. I shift its story-world so that, instead of a White, wealthy man with incredible power and influence at the centre of the stage, there is something distinctly non-human. Fear of pantheism within evangelicalism, an attribution of divine power to earth-based life, leads to its framing as demonic, as outside the safe enclosure and correct order of its imaginaries. But, outside of the total institution, these hierarchies, exclusions and power dynamics can be disrupted and re-thought. In my writing I divest the megachurch of its human exceptionalism, the human as the pinnacle of God's creation and the world as a redundant background and fabulate it as an oceanic body.

⁶³⁰ Armen Avanesian, 'Speculative Poetics – Preliminary Reflections,' in Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey and Suhail Malik, (eds.) *Realism Materialism Art*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 353.

Bibliography

- Abraham, John. 'Global Warming Made Hurricane Harvey More Destructive.' *The Guardian*, 23 May 2018, sec. Environment. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-percent/2018/may/23/global-warming-made-hurricane-harvey-more-destructive>.
- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- Abreu, Maria José A. de. *The Charismatic Gymnasium: Breath, Media, and Religious Revivalism in Contemporary Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.
- Adorno, Theodor. 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Verso Classics. London: Blackwell Verso, 1997.
- Adorno, Theodor. *In Search of Wagner*. Verso Modern Classics, London, New York: [1952] 2005.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Air Alliance Houston. 'Air Alliance Houston – Because Everyone Breathes'. Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://airalliancehouston.org/>.
- Alaimo, Stacy. 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and The Ethical Space of Nature.' In Stacy Alaimo and Hekman, Susan, eds. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington, Indiana; Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan J. Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- American Lung Association. 'Disparities in the Impact of Air Pollution.' Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/disparities>
- Amos, Owen. 'Why do US evangelicals support Trump's Jerusalem policy?' BBC News. Accessed 5th July 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-42402350>.
- Åsberg, Cecilia, Kathrin Thiele, and Iris Van der Tuin. 'Speculative Before the Turn: Reintroducing Feminist Materialist Performativity'. *Cultural Studies Review* 21, no. 2 (25 November 2015). <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v21i2.4324>.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. 2nd English language ed. London; New York: Verso, 2008.
- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Avanessian, Armen. 'Speculative Poetics – Preliminary Reflections,' in Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey and Suhail Malik, (eds.) *Realism Materialism Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015, pp 351-362.
- Bailey, Gauvin A. *Baroque and Rococo*. Art & Ideas, London; New York, N.Y: Phaidon, 2012.
- Bal, Mieke, and Christine van Boheemen. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 3rd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Bardon, Adrian. 'Faith and Politics Mix to Drive Evangelical Christians' Climate Change Denial'. The Conversation. Accessed 20 September 2021. <http://theconversation.com/faith-and-politics-mix-to-drive-evangelical-christians-climate-change-denial-143145>.
- Barnes, Sandra L. *Black Megachurch Culture: Models for Education and Empowerment*. Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010.

- Barad, Karen. 'Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings'. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (June 2015): 387–422.
- Barad, Karen Michelle. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Bate, Johnathan. 'Living with the Weather,' *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Green Romanticism (Fall, 1996), pp. 431-447.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
- Bebbington, David William. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. Repr. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Benjamin, Walter. 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility: Second version' (E. Jephcott, R. Livingstone, H. Eiland, & Others, Trans.), in M. W. Jennings, B. Doherty, & T. Y. Levin (eds.), *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Berardelli, Jeff. 'How climate change is making hurricanes more dangerous.' Yale Climate Connections. Accessed 9th June 2022. <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/07/how-climate-change-is-making-hurricanes-more-dangerous/>
- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.
- Bergson, Henri. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, [1935] 1954.
- Bird, Warren. 'Global Megachurches by Leadership Network.' Accessed 12th June 2022, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1IXTV6DcjAa190mWQitglsWgg3Tdhb14iBHa7EqquzZE/edit#gid=1496833091>
- Bjork-James, Sophie. 'Lifeboat Theology: White Evangelicalism, Apocalyptic Chronotopes, and Environmental Politics.' *Ethnos*, 1 November 2020, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2020.1839527>.
- Bogue, Ronald. *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.
- Böhme, Gernot. *Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics*. Thesis Eleven, 1993.
- Böhme, Gernot. *Anmutungen. Über das Atmosphärische*. Ostfildern vor Stuttgart: Edition Tertium, Arcaden, 1998.
- Böhme, Gernot. 'Learning to live with atmospheres: a new aesthetic humanist education,' in Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013.
- Böhme, Gernot. 'Urban Atmospheres: Charting New Directions for Architecture and Urban Planning,' in Christian Borch (Ed.) *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014.
- Böhme, Gernot, and Jean-Paul Thibaud. *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Böhme, Gernot, and A.-Chr Engels-Schwarzpaul. *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021.
- Bohme, Gernot. 'Nazi architecture as design for producing "Volksgemeinschaft"' in Trigg, Dylan, (ed.) *Atmospheres and Shared Emotions*. Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022: 152-161.
- Borch, Christian. *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014.

- Borch, Christian. "The Politics of Atmospheres; Architecture, Power, and the Senses." in Christian Borch (ed.) *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014.
- Barroso, Amanda. 'For American couples, gender gaps in sharing household responsibilities persist amid pandemic.' Pew Research Center. Accessed 4th August 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/25/for-american-couples-gender-gaps-in-sharing-household-responsibilities-persist-amid-pandemic/>
- Bowler, Kate, and Wen Reagan. 'Bigger, Better, Louder: The Prosperity Gospel's Impact on Contemporary Christian Worship'. *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 24, no. 2 (2014): 186–230. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2014.24.2.186>.
- Bowler, Kate. 'Here's Why People Hate Joel Osteen.' The Washington Post. Accessed 6th June 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/29/heres-why-people-hate-joel-osteen/>
- Bowler, Kate. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2013.
- Bratton, Susan. *ChurchScape: Megachurches and the Iconography of Environment*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016.
- Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Broyles, William. 'Disaster, Part Two: Houston.' Texas Monthly. Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/disaster-part-two-houston/>.
- Burrows, David, and Simon O'Sullivan. *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, 2019.
- Burton, James. *The Philosophy of Science Fiction: Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.
- Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and Power*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1984.
- Cannon-Brookes, P. and C. Cannon-Brookes, *Baroque Churches*. Great Buildings of the World, Feltham, New York: Hamlyn, 1969.
- Capps, Charles. *The Tongue: A Creative Force*. England, AR: Capps Pub., 2010.
- Carrington, Damian. 'Global Warming Made Hurricane Harvey Deadly Rains Three Times More Likely, Research Reveals'. *The Guardian*, 13 December 2017, sec. US news. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/13/global-warming-made-hurricane-harvey-deadly-rains-three-times-more-likely-research-shows>.
- Cavarero, Adriana. *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Chapman, Roger and James Ciment. *Culture Wars: An Encyclopaedia of Issues, Viewpoints and Voices*. Routledge, 2015.
- Chastain, Blake. "Exvangelical." Podcast series. Accessed 10th June 2022. <https://www.exvangelicalpodcast.com/>

Chen, Hong, and Mark S. Goldberg. 'The Effects of Outdoor Air Pollution on Chronic Illnesses'. *McGill Journal of Medicine: MJM: An International Forum for the Advancement of Medical Sciences by Students* 12, no. 1 (January 2009): 58–64.

Christianity. 'Charismatic Christians.' Accessed 11th November 2021. <https://christianity.org.uk/article/charismatic-christians>

Clarkson, Frederick. 'Dominionism Rising.' Political Research Associates. Accessed 30 September 2020. <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2016/08/18/dominionism-rising-a-theocratic-movement-hiding-in-plain-sight>.

CNN, 'Osteen rejects 'poverty' faith mindset.' Accessed 10th June 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2012/04/24/sot-osteen-god-and-wealth.cnn#:~:text=Televangelist%20Joel%20Osteen%20says%20he,to%20be%20a%20good%20Christian.>

Connolly, William E. *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Connolly, William E. 'Materialities of Experience,' in Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham [NC]; London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Cornwall Alliance. "An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming." Accessed 3rd Dec 2021. [https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/;](https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/)

Cornwall Alliance. "Prominent Signers of "An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming." Accessed 3rd Dec 2021. <https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/signers-of-an-evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/>

Cornwall Alliance, *Resisting the Green Dragon: A Biblical Response to One of the Greatest Deceptions of our Day*, Jax Distribution and CDR Communications, 2013.

Coser, Lewis A. *Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment*. New York; London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1974.

Costa, C., S. Carmentales, L. Madeira & G. Stanghellini, 'Phenomenology of atmospheres. The felt meanings of clinical encounters,' *Journal of Psychopathology*, 20(4), 351–357, 2014: 354

Cox, Christoph, Jenny Jaskey, and Suhail Malik, eds. *Realism Materialism Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.

Cruse-Ratcliffe, Cindy. 'Hurricane,' 2011, Track #1, *Twenty Three*, RPM Music, 2011

Cruse-Ratcliff, Cindy & Israel Houghton, 'Only in your presence,' 2002, Track #7, *Lakewood Live – We Speak To Nations*, Hosanna Music, 2002.

Dart, Tom. 'Why Did America's Biggest Megachurch Take so Long to Shelter Harvey Victims?' *The Guardian*, 30 August 2017, sec. US news. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/30/lakewood-church-joel-osteen-hurricane-harvey>.

Dart, Tom. 'Houston Fears Climate Change Will Cause Catastrophic Flooding: "It's Not If, It's When"' *The Guardian*. Accessed 16 September 2021. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/16/texas-flooding-houston-climate-change-disaster>

Data USA, 'Houston, TX.' Accessed 9th June 2022. [https://datausa.io/profile/geo/houston-tx#:~:text=The%205%20largest%20ethnic%20groups.%2DHispanic\)%20\(6.47%25\).](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/houston-tx#:~:text=The%205%20largest%20ethnic%20groups.%2DHispanic)%20(6.47%25).)

The Decolonial Atlas. 'Names and Locations of the Top 100 People Killing the Planet.' Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/2019/04/27/names-and-locations-of-the-top-100-people-killing-the-planet/?fbclid=IwAR153jYugTfdQ9DshsvMts0Rs47vGyMjQEYlrCLKEaAnzhezQt3PUK5Bjkg>

- Denker, Angela. *Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019.
- Descola, Philippe, and Marshall Sahlins. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Paperback edition. Chicago London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226145006.001.0001>.
- Doehuk, Darren. *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America*. First edition. New York: Basic Books, 2019.
- Dolphijn, Rick, and Iris van der Tuin. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. 1. ed. New Metaphysics. Ann Arbor, [Mich.]: Open Humanities Press, 2012.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge Classics. London; New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Drobnick, Jim. 'Eating Nothing: Cooking Aromas in Art and Culture', in Jim Drobnick (Ed.) *The Smell Culture Reader*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006.
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States.*, 2015.
- Easterling, Keller. *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerades*. Cambridge, Mass. London: MIT Press, 2007.
- Eddy, Michael S. 'Slam Dunk: Lakewood Church.' Live Design. Accessed 4th July 2022. <https://www.livedesignonline.com/business-people-news/slam-dunk-lakewood-church>.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*. 1. ed. A Metropolitan Book. New York: Picador, 2010.
- Einstein, Mara. *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*. Religion, Media and Culture Series. London; New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Eliason, Vic. "The Greatest Hoax", interview with James Inhofe. *Crosstalk*, March 7, 2012, audio, <https://www.vcyamerica.org/crosstalk/2012/03/07/the-greatest-hoax/>
- Elkins, James. *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Ellingson, Stephen. 'New Research on Megachurches: Non-denominationalism and Sectarianism' in Bryan Turner *New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2010.
- Ellingson, Stephen. *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. <http://www.SLQ.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=408559>.
- Ellison, Christopher G. and Darren E. Sheerkat, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 'Obedience and Autonomy: Religion and Parental Values Reconsidered', Dec., 1993, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Dec., 1993), pp. 313-329.
- Emerson, Michael O., and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Estrada, Lauryn Leigh. 'Clinical Considerations of the Evangelical Purity Movement's Impact on Female Sexuality,' *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 48:2, (2022), pp.121-132, DOI: [10.1080/0092623X.2021.1977445](https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2021.1977445)
- Farrier, David. *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Posthumanities 50. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.
- Favret, Mary A. *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009.

- Fernandez, Manny. 'What Makes Texas Texas.' *The New York Times*, 7 May 2016, sec. U.S. Accessed 13th June 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/us/what-makes-texas-texas.html>.
- Ferry, Stephen. "Pulling Off No Small Miracle." AWCI. Accessed Jan 21st 2022. <https://www.awci.org/media-archives/construction-dimensions/511-pulling-off-no-small-miracle>
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008.
- FitzGerald, Frances. *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. First Simon&Schuster hardcover edition. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.
- Ford, Thomas H. *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air: Atmospheric Romanticism in a Time of Climate Change*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Frazer, James G. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Fujita, Akiko. 'We Need 'to Move the Energy Sector Forward': Houston Mayor on Tackling Climate Change.' Yahoo! Finance. Accessed 21st January 2022. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/we-need-to-move-the-energy-sector-forward-houston-mayor-on-tackling-climate-change-130620589.html>.
- Guardian staff and agencies. 'Winds and Dry Conditions Fuel Multiple Texas Wildfires as Hundreds Evacuate.' The Guardian, 18 March 2022, sec. US news. Accessed 10th June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/18/texas-wildfires-eastland-complex-latest>.
- Guardian staff and agencies, 'Hurricane Laura levels homes and causes deaths as one of US's strongest ever storms.' The Guardian, 28th Aug. 2020. Accessed 9th June 2022, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/28/hurricane-laura-deaths-destruction-us-strongest-ever-storm>
- Guardian staff and agencies, 'Five cyclones churn in Atlantic Ocean for only second time in history.' The Guardian, 14th Sept. 2020. Accessed 9th June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/14/atlantic-bermuda-hurricane-tropical-storm-sally>
- Gallup. 'Religion', accessed 16th September 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>
- Geiger, A.W. '5 facts on how Americans view the Bible and other religious texts.' Pew Research Center. Accessed 8th June 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/>
- Gill, Rosalind and Shani Orgad, Sociological Research Online, 'The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism.' April 30, 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418769673>
- Goffman, Erving. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Penguin Social Sciences. Harmondsworth, Eng New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Goh, Robbie B. H. *Christianity in Southeast Asia*. ISEAS Southeast Asia Backgrounds Series, series ed. Saw Swee Hock, 2005.
- Goh, Robbie B. H. 'Hillsong and "Megachurch" Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism'. *Material Religion* 4, no. 3 (November 2008): 284–304. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175183408X376665>.
- Goh, Robbie B. H. 'The Experience Megachurch: Lakewood, Hillsong, and The Pragmatics and Semiotics of "Inspiration"'. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 9, no. 1 (1 May 2020): 33–58. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-bja10009>.

- Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Harvester Studies in Philosophy. Hassocks [Eng.]: Harvester Press, 1978.
- Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. 'Annual Statistics: Status of Global Christianity 2021.' Accessed 3rd March 2021. <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/resources/status-of-global-christianity/>
- Greshko, Michael. 'Climate Change Likely Supercharged Hurricane Harvey.' National Geographic. Accessed 21 June 2019. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/12/climate-change-study-hurricane-harvey-flood/>.
- Groys, Boris. 'Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk.' E-Flux. Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/>
- Griffero, Tonino, trans. Sarah De Sanctis, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.
- Griffero, Tonino, and Sarah De Sanctis. *Quasi-Things the Paradigm of Atmospheres*, 2018. <https://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781438464077>.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016
- Haraway, Donna. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'. *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.
- Harden, John D. 'For years, the Houston area has been losing ground', Houston Chronicle, last modified May 31, 2016. Accessed 26 Feb, 2021. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/For-years-the-Houston-area-has-been-losing-ground-7951625.php>
- Hart, D.G. *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.
- Hartford Institute for Religion Research. 'The Definition of a Megachurch.' Accessed 13th September, 2021. <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html>
- Hartford Institute for Religion Research. 'Megachurch database,' Accessed 13th September 2022. <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>
- Hartford Institute for Religion Research. 'Database of Megachurches in the U.S. (American Megachurches by Size). Accessed 8th June 2022. http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*&sb=3&so=descend
- Hartman, Andrew. *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14, muse.jhu.edu/article/241115,
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Hedges, Chris. *American Fascists the Christian Right and the War on America*. London: Vintage, 2008.
- Helmore, Edward and agencies. 'US Runs out of Atlantic Hurricane Names as Frenetic Season Continues.' The Guardian, 19 September 2020. Accessed 13th June 2022. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/19/hurricane-season-names-atlantic-us-tropical-storm-beta>.
- Helser, Jonathan David & Melissa Helser, 'Raise a Hallelujah,' 2019, Track #1, *Victory*, Bethel Music, 2019

Hey, Sam. *Megachurches*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

Hlavaty, Craig. 'This Week in 1975 The Summit Opened for Concerts and Basketball.' *Houston Chronicle*, 13 November 2017. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.chron.com/entertainment/music/article/Houston-building-formerly-known-as-The-Summit-6624649.php>.

Holeywell, Ryan. 'In Houston, the Land of Megachurches, Religious Service Attendance Declines.' Rice Kinder Institute for Urban Research. Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://kinder.rice.edu/2016/04/25/in-houston-the-land-of-megachurches-fewer-people-attending-religious-services#:~:text=The%20city%20has%2037%20megachurches,Nashville%2C%20according%20to%20that%20database>.

Hope, Aimee L.B. & Christopher R. Jones, 'The impact of religious faith on attitudes to environmental issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies: A mixed methods study,' *Technology in Society*, Vol. 38, (August 2014): 48-59, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160791X14000177?via%3Dihub>

Horn, Eva, and Valentine A. Pakis. *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kochhar, 'Trends in income and wealth inequality.' The Pew Research Centre. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>

Houghton, Israel. 'All About You,' 2008, Track #2, *Better Than Life: The Best of Lakewood Live*, Integrity Music, 2008.

Houghton, Israel, Meleasa Houghton And Cindy Cruse Ratcliff, 'Cover the Earth,' 2006, Track #1, *Cover the Earth*, Integrity Music, 2006.

Houghton, Israel & Mark Townsend, 'Free For All,' 2006, Track #8, *Cover the Earth*, Integrity Music, 2006.

Houtman, Dick, and Birgit Meyer, eds. *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*. 1st ed. The Future of the Religious Past. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

Hunter, Bob. 'Osteen's Gospel-Light Message' *Christian Research Journal*, volume 31, number 3 (2008).

Hunter, James Davison. "The Shaping of American Foreign Policy" in Michael Cromartie (ed.), *Evangelicals and Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1989.

Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: BasicBooks, 1991.

Inhofe, James. "The Science of Climate Change." (Congressional Record Volume 149, Number 113 (Monday, July 28, 2003)) Congressional Record Online, Government Publishing Office. Accessed 21st January 2022. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2003-07-28/html/CREC-2003-07-28-pt1-PgS10012.htm>

Inspired Media Entertainment, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, Inspired Media Entertainment, Microsoft Windows, 2006

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 'FAQ1: What are the new insights on climate impacts, vulnerability and adaptation from IPCC?' Accessed 9th June 2022. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/about/frequently-asked-questions/keyfaq1>

Jackson John. *Pastorpreneur: Pastors and Entrepreneurs Answer the Call*. Friendswood, Texas: Baxter Press, 2003.

Jacobs, Alan. "'oddkin" and really odd kin.' *The New Atlantis*, 7 October 2016. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/text-patterns/oddkin-and-really-odd-kin>.

Jue, Melody. *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater*. Elements. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

- Kamp, Tahia Thaddeus. "The "Magical Bishop" of Dada: Hugo Ball and "The Innermost Alchemy Of The Word", in Nancy Pedri and Laurence Petit (eds.), *Picturing the Language of Images*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.
- Kaplan, Juliana. 'Joel Osteen's taxes: What's probably true and what isn't.' Insider. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/joel-osteen-rich-taxes-wealth-ferrari-twitter-2021-7?r=US&IR=T>
- Karnes, Kimberly, Wayne McIntosh, Irwin L. Morris, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. 'Mighty Fortresses: Explaining the Spatial Distribution of American Megachurches'. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 2 (June 2007): 261–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2007.00355.x>.
- Kaze, Omella. 'EIA Expects U.S. Fossil Fuel Production to Reach New Highs in 2023.' U.S. Energy Information Administration. Accessed 14 July 2022. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=50978>.
- Kelly, Shirley M. 'Better Together: Our Freedom in Christ.' Lakewood Church Women's group, 31st July 2019.
- Kett, Dr. Maria, Gaya Sriskanthan & Ellie Cole, 'Disability and Climate Justice: A Research Project,' (Open Society Foundations, December 2021). Accessed 10th June 2022. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/sites/epidemiology_health_care/files/disability_and_climate_justice_research_project_final_to_share.pdf
- KHOU11 'Joel Osteen says George Floyd's death won't "be in vain"' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUTEj8q1YKI> (Accessed 4th April 2023).
- Kilde, Jeanne Halgren. *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *The Democracy of Species*. Green Ideas 10. London: Penguin Books, 2021.
- King, Larry. Interview with Joel and Victoria Osteen. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/lkl/date/2007-10-16/segment/01>: "You know what? There are different callings. I can't fault anybody."
- Kitson, Michael. *The Age of Baroque*. London: Hamlyn, 1976
- Klages, Bill. 'Lakewood Church – Houston, Texas,' New Klages Inc. Accessed 8th June 2022. http://www.newklages.com/NKI_lakewood.htm
- Klaver, Miranda. 'Media Technology Creating "Sermonic Events." The Hillsong Megachurch Network'. *CrossCurrents* 65, no. 4 (December 2015): 422–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12164>.
- Kreider, Kristen. *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site*. International Library of Cultural Studies, London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2014.
- Lacan, Jacques and Bruce Fink. *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 20. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.
- LaHaye, Tim, and David Noebel, *Mind Siege: The Battle for Truth in the New Millenium*. Nashville, TN: Word, 2000.
- LaHaye, Tim, and Jerry B Jenkins. *Left Behind*. Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2011.
- Lakewood Church. 'About Us.' Accessed 6th June 2022. <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about>
- Lakewood Church. 'Our History.' Accessed 7th July 2022. <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/about/history>
- Lakewood Church. *New Beginnings*. Lakewood Church, date of publishing unknown. Accessed 6th June 2022. <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/newbeginnings>

- Lakewood Church. 'Overflow: End of Year Report 2020.' No longer available online.
- Lakewood Church. "I am blessed, Prosperous, Redeemed, Forgiven." Facebook, 4th April 2021. https://fb.watch/aM_LO_G4S/
- Lakewood Church. 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.' Instagram video post, 14th April 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CcWLYtFsCoX/>
- Lakewood Church. 'A Prayer for Today.' Instagram post, 29th April 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc75TjbscTc/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>
- Lakewood Church. 'Win the War Within.' Instagram post, 2nd May 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdCS-RdMEMp/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>
- Lakewood Church. 'Don't put your human limitations on the God who spoke worlds into existence.' Instagram video post, 6th May 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CdOou5Wpf4Q/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>
- Lakewood Church. 'You have greatness in you!', Instagram video post, 24th May 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cd9LaFSDQud/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>
- Lakewood Church. 'The History of Lakewood Church.' Lakewood Church YouTube Channel. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGkuj14ewCc>
- Lakewood Church. 'A Lakewood Legacy.' Lakewood Church YouTube Channel. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfEyUg7J-fA>
- Lakewood Church. 'Lakewood Church John Osteen Beginnings in Fort Worth TX.' Lakewood Church YouTube Channel. Accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbVR7Lg4PxQ;>
- Lakewood Church. 'Lakewood Church - A New Era.' Lakewood Church YouTube Channel. Accessed 7th June 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6uXnJkTxVA&list=RDLVs6uXnJkTxVA&start_radio=1&rv=s6uXnJkTxVA&t=72;
- Lakewood Church. 'Joel Osteen – How did his church begin?' Lakewood Church YouTube Channel. Accessed 7th June 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZtfcnN_cak
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Reissued with a new Introduction 2018. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Latour, Bruno, and Catherine Porter. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity, 2017.
- Lee, Shayne, and Phillip Luke Sinitiere. *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Levi-Straus, Claude. *Myth and Meaning*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001.
- Lewis-Freeman, Ramona. 'People of God, are y'all speaking to Laura or what?!', Facebook, 26th August 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3464309083592497&set=a.239139896109448>
- Leys, Ruth. 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique'. *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (March 2011): 434–72. <https://doi.org/10.1086/659353>.
- 'Lifetime Achievement: Rene Lagler.' Art Directors Guild (ADG). Accessed 4th July 2022. <https://adg.org/awards/lifetime-achievement/rene-lagler/>

- Lindsey, Aaron W., Cindy Cruse Ratcliff, Israel Houghton, 'Highly Exalted,' 2002, Track #1, *Lakewood Live – We Speak To Nations*, Hosanna Music, 2002.
- Lindsey, Aaron W., & Israel Houghton, 'Sing,' 2008, Track #4, *Lakewood Live – Better Than Life: The Best Of Lakewood Live*, Integrity Music, 2008
- Long, Elisa F., M. Keith Chen, and Ryne Rohla. 'Political Storms: Emergent Partisan Skepticism of Hurricane Risks'. *Science Advances* 6, no. 37 (1 September 2020): eabb7906. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abb7906>.
- Loveland, Anne C., and Otis B. Wheeler. *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History*. Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2003.
- Luce, Edward. 'A preacher for Trump's America: Joel Osteen and the prosperity gospel.' *Financial Times*. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/3990ce66-60a6-11e9-b285-3acd5d43599e>
- LYA, "Prince of Peace," 2019, Track #3, *In The Name Vol. 1*, Lakewood Records, 2019
- Macfarlane, Robert. *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*. London: Penguin Books, 2020.
- Maddox, Marion. "'In the Goofy Parking Lot": Growth Churches as a Novel Religious Form for Late Capitalism'. *Social Compass* 59, no. 2 (June 2012): 146–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768612440954>.
- Maddox, Marion. 'Prosper, Consume and Be Saved'. *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 1 (April 2013): 108–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303213476108>.
- Marshall, George. *Don't Even Think about It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. Paperback edition. London Oxford New York New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Marti, Gerardo. 'The Unexpected Orthodoxy of Donald J Trump: White Evangelical Support for the 45th President of the United States - Sociology of Religion 80 (1): 1-8. 2019.' *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*. Accessed 28 June 2019. https://www.academia.edu/38022267/The_Unexpected_Orthodoxy_of_Donald_J_Trump_White_Evangelical_Support_for_the_45th_President_of_the_United_States_-_Sociology_of_Religion_80_1_1-8_2019.
- Martin, William C. *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*. 1st ed. New York: Broadway Books, 1996.
- Martin-Barton, Richard. 'Record Number of Hurricanes Make Landfall in US in 2020.' *The Guardian*, 14 October 2020. Accessed 13th June 2022. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/14/record-number-hurricanes-make-landfall-united-states-2020>.
- McBain, Sophie. 'The dark side of the wellness industry.' *The New Statesman*. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2020/06/dark-side-wellness-industry>
- McGurk, Stuart. 'Making dreams come true: inside the new age world of manifesting,' *The Guardian*, accessed 9th July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/mar/20/making-dreams-come-true-inside-the-new-age-world-of-manifesting>.
- McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2022.
- McKinley Jr., James C. 'Jury Finds Pastor Did Not Assault a Flight Attendant.' *New York Times*. Accessed 6th June 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/us/15houston.html>
- Mellor, Phillip A. & Chris Shilling in 'The Religious Habitus: Embodiment, Religion and Sociological Theory' in Turner, Brian (ed). *New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

- Melton, J. Gordon. 'Pentecostalism' *Britannica*. Accessed 11th November 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pentecostalism>
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.
- Meyer, Birgit and Jeremy Stolow, 'Light Mediations: Introduction', *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696557>,
- Miller, Christine and Carlin, Nathan, 'Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject: Meeting the Needs of the Group Self and Its Individual Members in and from the Largest Church in America', *Pastoral Psychology*, 59:27–51, (April 2009).
- Milman, Oliver. 'From Harvey to Michael: How America's Year of Major Hurricanes Unfolded.' *The Guardian*, 16 October 2018, sec. World news. Accessed 13th June 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/15/us-year-of-hurricanes-extreme-michael-irma-florence>.
- Milman, Oliver and Fiona Harvey. 'US Is Hotbed of Climate Change Denial, Major Global Survey Finds.' *The Guardian*, 8th May 2019. Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/07/us-hotbed-climate-change-denial-international-poll>.
- Milman, Oliver. "Invisible killer': fossil fuels caused 8.7m deaths globally in 2018, research finds." *The Guardian*, 9th Feb. 2021. Accessed: 6th December 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/feb/09/fossil-fuels-pollution-deaths-research>
- Milman, Oliver. 'Global dismay as supreme court ruling leaves Biden's climate policy in tatters.' *The Guardian*, 6th July 2022. Accessed 11th July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/06/supreme-court-epa-ruling-biden-climate-policy-global-reaction>
- Mitchell, Amy, Mark Jurkowitz, J. Baxter Oliphant & Elisa Shearer, 'Political Divides, Conspiracy Theories and Divergent News Sources Heading Into 2020 Election.' Pew Research Center. Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/09/16/political-divides-conspiracy-theories-and-divergent-news-sources-heading-into-2020-election/>
- Moore, Jason W. 'The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis,' *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:3, 2017: 594-630, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036)
- Moore, Jason W. (ed.). *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: Pm Press, 2016.
- Moore, Rowan. 'An Inversion of Nature: How Air Conditioning Created the Modern City.' *The Guardian*. Accessed 24 June 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/14/how-air-conditioning-created-modern-city>.
- Mooring, Leeland. 'Lion and the Lamb,' 2016, Track #6, *Have It All*, Bethel Music, 2016
- Morgan, David. 'Enchantment, Disenchantment, Re-Enchantment,' in James Elkins and David Morgan (eds.) *Re-Enchantment*. New York and London: Routledge, 2009.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Musk, Elon. 'Making Life Multiplanetary.' YouTube. Accessed 7th June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdUX3ypDVwI>

- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Theory and History of Literature, v. 76. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Nassar, Dalia, ed. *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Environmental Cultures Series. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. 'Weathering: Climate Change and the "Thick Time" of Transcorporeality'. *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 558–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12064>.
- Neimanis, Astrida, and Jennifer Mae Hamilton. 'Weathering'. *Feminist Review* 118, no. 1 (April 2018): 80–84. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0097-8>.
- Nobus, Dany. "The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine Jouissance: Lacan's Reading of Bernini's *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*." *The Comparatist* 39 (2015): 22-46. [doi:10.1353/com.2015.0019](https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2015.0019).
- Nuccitelli, Dana. 'Battered by Extreme Weather, Americans Are More Worried about Climate Change | Dana Nuccitelli'. *The Guardian*, 20 November 2017, sec. Environment. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2017/nov/20/battered-by-extreme-weather-americans-are-more-worried-about-climate-change>.
- O'Connor, Brendan. 'How Fossil Fuel Money Made Climate Change Denial the Word of God.' Splinter. Accessed 28 October 2019. <https://splinternews.com/how-fossil-fuel-money-made-climate-denial-the-word-of-g-1797466298>.
- Onishi, Bradley. "The Rise of #Exvangelical." Religion and Politics. Accessed: 2nd March 2021. <https://religionandpolitics.org/2019/04/09/the-rise-of-exvangelical/>
- Osteen, Joel. 'Our Ministry: Joel Osteen,' Joel Osteen Ministries. Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.joelosteen.com/our-ministry>
- Osteen, Joel. *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2004.
- Osteen, Joel. *Daily Readings from Your Best Life Now*. New York; Boston; Nashville: Warner Faith, 2005.
- Osteen, Joel. *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day*. New York: Free Press, 2007.
- Osteen, Joel. *The Power of I Am: Two Words That Will Change Your Life Today*. New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2016.
- Osteen, Joel. *Empty Out the Negative: Make Room for More Joy, Greater Confidence, and New Levels of Influence*. New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2020.
- Osteen, Joel. *Rule Your Day: 6 Keys to Maximizing Your Success and Accelerating Your Dreams*. First edition. New York: FaithWords, 2022.
- Osteen, Joel. 'Call It In.' Lakewood Church Service, 28th July 2019. Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2019/July/2019-07-28-1100-joelosteen>
- Osteen, Joel. 'Hope.' Instagram Stories. Accessed 7th June 2022. https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3ODg0OTkyOTY4NDM0Nzk2?story_media_id=2631497314279345327&igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

- Osteen, Joel. 'Inspiration.' Instagram Stories. Accessed 7th June 2022. https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3OTI5NjE4NjA2MTQ3MDI3?story_media_id=1818956386747585284&igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=
- Osteen, Joel. 'Rise up and go after your dreams.' Instagram post, 13th May 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdfurgfPrch/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>
- Osteen, Joel. "The scripture says, "Two are better than one. When one falls, the other can lift him up." Instagram video post, 27th October 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVh5T7ctjtX/>
- Osteen, Joel. Lakewood Church Message, 23rd April 2017. No longer available online.
- Osteen, Joel. 'Change Your Name.' YouTube, November 17th 2019. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xEwzWJvjGA>
- Osteen, Joel. 'Joel Osteen - The Power of the Soil.' Joel Osteen Channel, YouTube. Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyUJwxf4syY>
- Osteen, John. *There is a Miracle in Your Mouth*, Houston: John H. Osteen Publications, 1972.
- Osteen Comes, Lisa. 'Facing the Future without Fear Part 1: Signs of the End Times.' Lakewood Church Service, 10th March 2022. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/March/2022-03-09-1930-lisaosteencomes>
- Osteen Comes, Lisa. 'Facing the Future without Fear Part 2: The Rapture of the Church.' Lakewood Church Service, 17th March 2022. Accessed 7th June 2022. <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/March/2022-03-16-1930-lisaosteencomes>
- Osteen, Paul. 'Final Instructions for Jesus' Disciples.' Lakewood Church Service Message, December 30, 2007.
- Osteen, Victoria. *Love Your Life: Living Happy, Healthy, and Whole*. New York: Free Press, 2008.
- Osteen, Victoria. *Exceptional You*. New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2019.
- Osteen, Victoria. 'Seeing Beyond the Logical.' Lakewood Church Service Introductory message, Sunday April 3rd 2022. Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/watch-online/2022/April/2022-04-03-1100-joelosteen>
- Peck, Jamie. A Houston megachurch shut out flood victims. A Twitter storm opened it.' The Guardian. Accessed 4th April 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/30/houston-megachurch-shut-out-flood-victims-twitter-storm>
- Perrin, Ruth. 'Losing My Religion: Millennials and Faith Loss.' Discipleship Research. Accessed 6th June 2022. <http://discipleshipresearch.com/2018/02/losing-my-religion-millennials-and-faith-loss/>
- The Pew Research Centre. 'America's Changing Religious Landscape.' Accessed 16th September 2021. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>
- The Pew Research Centre. 'Religious Landscape Study: Adults in the Houston metro area.' Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/houston-metro-area/>
- The Pew Research Centre. 'Public Sees a Future Full of Promise and Peril.' Accessed 16th September 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/06/22/public-sees-a-future-full-of-promise-and-peril/>
- The Pew Research Centre. "Religion and Views on Climate and Energy Issues." Accessed on 16th September 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues/>

Powell, William Dylan. *Houston then & now*, 2018.

Pro Sound News. 'Lakewood Chooses RBDG, Euphonix.' Russ Berger Design Group. Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://rbdg.com/articles/lakewood-chooses-rbdg-euphonix/>.

Pulliam Bailey, Sarah. 'White evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, exit polls show.' Washington Post. Accessed 7th March 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly-for-donald-trump/?utm_term=.0d2a0eb26cdb

Purser, Ronald E. *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. London: Repeater, 2019.

Rakow, Katja. 'Therapeutic Culture and Religion in America'. *Religion Compass* 7, no. 11 (2013): 485–97.

Rakow, Katja. 'Religious Branding and the Quest to Meet Consumer Needs: Joel Osteen's "Message of Hope".' in Jan Stievernann, Philip Goff, and Detlef Junker (eds.) *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Rakow, Katja. 'The Light of the World: Mediating Divine Presence through Light and Sound in a Contemporary Megachurch'. *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 84–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696561>.

Ravilious, Kate. 'Weatherwatch: Slower Tropical Storms Are Raising Flood Threat.' The Guardian, 14 September 2018, sec. News. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/sep/14/weatherwatch-slower-tropical-storms-are-raising-flood-threat>.

Redman, Matt. "We Praise You", 2020, Track #2, *Let There Be Wonder*, Integrity Music, 2020; and Hillsong United, "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)", 2013, Track #4, *Zion*, Hillsong, 2013.

Rend Collective, 'My Lighthouse,' 2014, Track #3, *The Art of Celebration*, Integrity Music, 2014

Ritzer, George. *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010.

Rieger, Joerg, and Edward Waggoner. *Religious Experience and New Materialism Movement Matters*, 2016.

Riley, Denise. *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Robertson, Campbell. 'A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches.' New York Times. Accessed 11th November 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/blacks-evangelical-churches.html>

Robles-Anderson, E. 'The Crystal Cathedral: Architecture for Mediated Congregation'. *Public Culture* 24, no. 3 68 (1 October 2012): 577–99. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-1630672>.

Roper, John C. 'Big Budget Supports Lakewood's Higher Calling.' Houston Chronicle. Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://www.chron.com/business/article/Big-budget-supports-Lakewood-s-higher-calling-1920840.php>.

Rose, Deborah Bird. *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*. Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

Rose, Deborah Bird. 'Shimmer: When All You Love Is Being Trashed,' in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, ed., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Rose, Nikolas. *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Rose, Nikolas. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

- Rosen, Aaron. *Art & Religion in the 21st Century*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2017.
- Runkel, Simon. 'Collective Atmospheres. Phenomenological Explorations of Protesting Crowds with Canetti, Schmitz, and Tarde'. *Ambiances*, 20 March 2018. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.1067>.
- Russ Berger Design Group. 'Lakewood Church.' Accessed 21 June 2019. <https://rbdg.com/project/lakewood-church/>.
- Russell-Kraft, Stephanie, Laura Marsh, Laura Marsh, Kate Aronoff, Kate Aronoff, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, et al. 'Can Religion Give You PTSD?' *The New Republic*, 23 March 2021. Accessed 13th June 2022. https://newrepublic.com/article/161772/can-religion-give-ptsd?utm_source=social&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=sharebtn&fbclid=IwAR12BSWq9hhH-isVw0u362i7UteMXpSDrruIkbp3SMCNia83WAlhv4_J8Lw.
- Sanders, George. 'Religious Non-Places: Corporate Megachurches and Their Contributions to Consumer Capitalism'. *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 1 (January 2016): 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514531605>.
- Sarin, Vic. *Left Behind: The Movie*, Cloud Ten Pictures and Namesake Entertainment, 2000.
- Schechner, Richard. *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. New ed. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Schmitz, Hermann. *Der Gefühlsraum, System der Philosophie*. Vol. 3. Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 2005.
- Schmitz, Hermann, Rudolf Owen Müllan, and Jan Slaby. 'Emotions Outside the Box—the New Phenomenology of Feeling and Corporeality'. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 10, no. 2 (June 2011): 241–59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9195-1>.
- Schmitz, Hermann. *Atmosphären*. Originalausgabe. Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 2014.
- Schmitz, Hermann et al., *New phenomenology: A Brief Introduction*. Milan: Mimesis International, 2019.
- Schneider, Jim. "Texas Power, Green New Deal, Paris Climate Accord & Agenda 2030." Interview with Tom De Weese. *Crosstalk*, February 23, 2021, audio. <https://www.vcyamerica.org/crosstalk/2021/02/23/texas-power-green-new-deal-paris-climate-accord-agenda-2030/>
- Schuback, Marcia Sá Cavalcante, ed. *Dis-Orientations: Philosophy, Literature, and the Lost Grounds of Modernity*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015.
- Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Simon, Ed. *America and Other Fictions: On Radical Faith and Post-Religion*. Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2018.
- Sinitiere, Phillip Luke. *Salvation with a Smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Sipes, James L. and Matthew K. Zeve, *The Bayous of Houston*. South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2012.
- Smith, Gregory A., Micheal Rotolo and Patricia Tevington, '45% of Americans Say U.S. Should Be a 'Christian Nation'' Pew Research Center. Accessed 10th February 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/45-of-americans-say-u-s-should-be-a-christian-nation/>.
- Smith, Samuel. 'Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church Honored by Houston Mayor for Hurricane Harvey Recovery Efforts.' *The Christian Post*. Accessed 6th June 2022. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/joel-osteen-lakewood-church-honored-houston-mayor-hurricane-harvey-recovery-efforts.html>

- Sødal, Helje Kringlebotn. “‘Victor, Not Victim’: Joel Osteen’s Rhetoric of Hope’. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25, no. 1 (January 2010): 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900903416804>.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Spearing, Anthony C. and Elizabeth Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*. London; New York: Penguin Classics, 1998.
- Stevenson, Jill. *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First Century America*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- Steyerl, Hito. ‘In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective.’ *E-Flux Journal*. Accessed 9th June 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective>
- Stievermann, Jan, ed. *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Stewart, Katherine. *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, London, New York etc.: Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Strhan, Anna. *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals*. First edition. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Studio Red Architects. ‘Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas.’ Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.studioredarchitects.com/lakewood-church-houston-texas/>.
- Szeemann, Harald, Susanne Häni, and Kunsthaus Zürich, eds. *Der Hang Zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien Seit 1800*. Aarau: Sauerländer, 1983.
- Tarico, Valerie. ‘Religious Trauma Syndrome: How Some Organised Religion Leads to Mental Health Problems,’ *TruthOut*. Accessed 6th June 2022. [https://truthout.org/articles/religious-trauma-syndrome-how-some-organized-religion-leads-to-mental-health-problems/#:~:text=Winell%3A%20Religious%20trauma%20syndrome%20\(RTS,of%20leaving%20a%20religius%20group](https://truthout.org/articles/religious-trauma-syndrome-how-some-organized-religion-leads-to-mental-health-problems/#:~:text=Winell%3A%20Religious%20trauma%20syndrome%20(RTS,of%20leaving%20a%20religius%20group).
- Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Taylor, R. B. *Human Territorial Functioning: An Empirical, Evolutionary Perspective on Individual and Small Group Territorial Cognitions, Behaviors, and Consequences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Technologies for Worship Magazine, ‘Lakewood Church: From Stadium to Sanctuary.’ Accessed 8th June 2022. <https://tfwm.com/lakewood-church-from-stadium-to-sanctuary/>
- Thomas, Stephanie. ‘Another Chemical Fire, This One Deadly; Stronger Protections, Enforcement Needed at Chemical Plants.’ *Public Citizen*. Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://www.citizen.org/news/another-chemical-fire-this-one-deadly-stronger-protections-enforcement-needed-at-chemical-plants/>.
- Thumma, Scott. *The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory: Megachurch in Modern American Society*. Doctoral Dissertation, Emory University, 1996.
- Thumma, Scott, and Dave Travis. *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America’s Largest Churches*. 1st ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Tilley, Christopher. *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity*. London: Routledge, 1991.

- Tippett, Krista. 'A Life Worthy of Our Breath.' Interview with Ocean Vuong, On Being podcast, April 30th 2020. Accessed 10th June 2022. <https://onbeing.org/programs/ocean-vuong-a-life-worthy-of-our-breath/>
- Trepanier, Jill, and Clay Tucker. 'Event-Based Climatology of Tropical Cyclone Rainfall in Houston, Texas and Miami, Florida'. *Atmosphere* 9, no. 5 (3 May 2018): 170. <https://doi.org/10.3390/atmos9050170>.
- Trigg, Dylan, ed. *Atmospheres and Shared Emotions*. Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, ed. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Tucker-Worgs, Tamelyn. 'Get on board, little children, there's room for many more: The Black Megachurch Phenomenon' *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* (2001) 29: 177-203,
- Tuana, Nancy. 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,' in Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Turner, Brian, ed. *New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2010.
- Twitchell, James B., *Branded Nation*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.
- Understanding Houston. 'Examining the effects of environmental inequity in Houston.' Accessed 9th June 2022. <https://www.understandinghouston.org/blog/examining-the-effects-of-environmental-racism-in-houston#:~:text=Environmental%20racism%20disproportionately%20harms%20communities,predominantly%20Black%20and%20Brown%20neighborhoods>.
- USA Today. 'America's largest church opens in former arena.' Accessed 7th June 2022. https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-14-largest-church_x.htm
- Van Biema, David, 'Religion and Race: Can Megachurches Desegregate?' TIME. Accessed 4 March 2020. <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1950943-2,00.html>.
- Van Dooren, Thom, and Deborah Bird Rose. 'Lively Ethography'. *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (1 May 2016): 77–94. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527731>.
- Veldman, Robin Globus. *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate Change*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 471 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>
- Voelz, Johannes, "Toward an Aesthetics of Populism, Part I: The Populist Space of Appearance." *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature (REAL)* 34 (2018): 203–28.
- Wade, Matthew. 'Seeker-Friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution'. *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4 (December 2016): 661–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783315575171>.
- Wade, Matthew. "'The Church I See...' – On the Vision and Scale of the Megachurch', October 2015. https://www.academia.edu/16903927/The_Church_I_see_On_the_vision_and_scale_of_the_megachurch.
- Wald, Kenneth D., Dennis E. Owen and Samuel S. Hill Jr., 'Churches as Political Communities'. *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (June 1988): pp. 531–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1957399>.
- Waldman, Katy. "Trump's Tower of Babble." Slate. Accessed 11th July 2022. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/11/how-donald-trump-uses-language-and-why-we-cant-stop-listening.html>

- Walters, Joanna and Sam Morris. 'Trump's Evangelical Panel Remains Intact as Others Disband. Here Are His Religious Cheerleaders.' *The Guardian*, 19th Aug 2017. Accessed 25 June 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/18/donald-trump-evangelicals-charlottesville>.
- Walters, Joanna, and agencies. 'Harvey Was Second-Most Expensive US Hurricane on Record, Official Report Says'. *The Guardian*, 25 January 2018, sec. US news. Accessed 13th June 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/25/hurricane-harvey-costs-storms>.
- Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Life*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2002.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge, 1930: 2001.
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174>.
- White Jnr, Lynn. 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,' *Science Journal*, Vol. 155, Issue 3767, (March 1967): 1203-1207 <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>
- Whitehead, Andrew L., and Samuel L. Perry. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Winslow, Luke A. "The Imaged Other: Style and Substance in the Rhetoric of Joel Osteen." *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 3 (July 2014): 250–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2013.872173>.
- Witvliet, John D. 'The Blessing and Bane of the North American Megachurch: Implications for Twenty-First Century Congregational Song.' *The Hymn* 50. January 1999: 6-14.
- World Evangelical Alliance. 'Who We Are.' Accessed 16th September 2021. <https://www.worldea.org/>
- World Population Review. 'Houston, Texas Population 2022.' Accessed 9th June 2022. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/houston-tx-population>
- Zaimov, Stoyan. 'Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church Ranked America's Largest Megachurch With 52,000 Weekly Attendance.' *The Christian Post*. Accessed: 25 September 2019. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/joel-osteens-lakewood-church-ranked-americas-largest-megachurch-with-52k-in-attendance.html>
- Zumthor, Peter. *Atmospheres*. Berlin, Basel: Birkhauser, 2015.
- Zschech, Darlene, and Israel Houghton, "In Jesus Name," 2015, Track #7, *Covered: Alive in Asia*, RCA Inspiration and RGM NewBreed, 2015.

