A POSTMODERN NARRATIVE EXAMINATION OF IDENTIFICATION IN CHRISTIAN MEGACHURCHES

By

TIMOTHY EVERETT SIMEON BETTS

Bachelor of Science, 2017
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

Submitted to the Faculty
Graduate Division
College of Communication
Texas Christian University
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

MAY 2019

BOB SCHIEFFER
COLLEGE *of* COMMUNICATION

A Postmodern Narrative Examination of Identification in Christian Megachurches

Thesis approved:

Amorette Hinderaker 4/24/19
Committee Chair Date

4/24/19
Committee Member Date

4/24/19
Committee Member Date

Julie O'Neil 4/30/19
Associate Dean Date

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my friends in the graduate program, your constancy and your humor and your acceptance of my quirks have made these past two years a joy. My thanks, especially to the debate partner who put up with me for longer than he should have—Colten: I cannot wait to see what intellectual brilliance comes next.

For the professors who have left their indelible mark on this thesis and on my time at TCU; Jerry Appel and Andrew Ledbetter, I am ever grateful for the conversations, the laughs, and the Star Wars talk (Andrew). I will be sure my dogma doesn't run over my karma, Jerry.

For the members of the committee who read and re-read this thesis, joked about the ridiculous length, provided invaluable commentary, and transformed it into the Brobdingnagian work it is; Johny Garner and Paul Schrodt, you both have made me a better thinker, scholar, person.

For Ma Duck, Amo, Amorette, from icebergs to temples, three UK elections, calamity, blizzards, sewing kits, too few pens, Jackson, TN, so many bad duo rounds, and now, this thesis—I will put it in writing: you were right. No other words suffice. I'm simply not qualified.

For my parents and grandparents, always and ineffably.

"The world only spins forward."

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

> *"You know what I love about corporate worship? It's that we can encourage and stir each other on to go deeper in the Lord. When I see someone else that is just going for it in the presence of the Lord it stirs my heart and I don't want to be a spectator. I want to dive in, and I want to worship, too."*

On my first visit to Apex Church[1], the worship team leader took a moment between songs to describe her perspective on the benefits of *corporate worship*. As the backdrop of soft guitar and piano drew to a crescendo, she described how beautiful she found the unity, the togetherness of the service as it pushed her to "go deeper in the Lord." As a visitor to the church and as a critical ethnographer, the concept of corporate worship spoke to other aspects of the service. From the swaths of local police officers directing traffic around the worship center to the hiss of steam and wafting scents of espresso drifting from the café, the concept of corporate worship spoke more to my initial impression of the polished, pre-packaged exterior of the megachurch experience. Ten miles down the road, under a similarly large roof, I attended my first service at Unity church where, instead of a more traditional service led by a minister or religious official, Oliver North, then the incoming president of the National Rifle Association, delivered the sermon. Afterwards, members of the congregation were invited to purchase North's autobiography, get an autograph, and take pictures with the former political commentator and participant in the Iran-Contra scandal of the Reagan administration. However, beyond the smoke and the mirrors, literal and figurative in both cases, the experiences that both churches offered their 50,000 members represented an artfully crafted performance for all of us as spectators and participants.

As traditionally understood, megachurches are defined as protestant Christian churches

[1] The churches examined in this study have been assigned pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

with greater than 2,000 members in weekly attendance (Thumma, 2001), and they are growing in both numbers and size. Some 83 percent of megachurches report at least two-percent growth between 2009 and 2014 with a median growth rate of 26 percent (Thumma & Bird, 2015). Thirteen percent of the megachurches at least doubled their size during the same five-year period. Warf and Winsberg (2010) reported that in 2005, there were 1,310 megachurches in the United States with a total of 4.5 million; five years later, Thumma and Bird (2015) found that there were over 1,611 megachurches with over 6 million members residing in the United States.

The rapid growth of the megachurch provides a stark contrast to other religious institutions in the United States. Overall, religious identification in the United States has declined (Pew Research Center, 2015), leaving many institutions competing for membership to maintain social relevance and financial stability. Miller (2002) referenced a market metaphor to explain the strategic behaviors and choices of religious organizations in competition with each other; similarly, economists Goff and Trawick (2008) examined religious branding as a means of competing in this religious marketplace where, instead of a homogenous product, churches attempt to differentiate themselves through branded organizational identifiers such as demonization and participatory intensity. Despite these influences on religious institutions, though, Roozen (2015) noted that megachurches have largely found themselves insulated from this declining church membership. Megachurches are not only growing in size and in membership—they are defying the trends of religious institutions across the United States and characterizing their own growth as an organizational and theological necessity for the spiritual growth of the church and the individual.

The megachurch, as it has emerged in the United States, is a unique space for religious organizing. Simultaneously embracing corporate and bureaucratic organizing (Sanders, 2014)

and eschewing the normative conception of what it means to do “church,” megachurches represent a paradigm shift in modern religious organizing and transform the position of the church member in supporting the church and serving as part of the theatrical production of its message. Consequently, this study examines how members identify with and craft their identity in the context of this transformation of religious organizing as a process of structurational identification that treats identity and identification as an interplay between discursive organizational structure and identity performance (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). To this end, the study will be situated at the intersection of Boje’s (2001, 2008) framework of storytelling organization and his critical dramaturgy (Boje, 2017) and the post-modern concept of spectacle, or, those forces that act to fragment and unify lived experience (Best & Kellner, 2001; Debord, 1967/1995). These rich theoretical perspectives will illuminate the process of identifying within the megachurch as it occurs in the context of postmodern concepts of fragmentation and complexity. Thus, this study will advance a conceptual understanding of megachurches as a transformation of religious organizing in a postmodern world.

Identifying and the Megachurch

Organized religious institutions have long influenced, and continue to influence, the formation of individual identity (Conrad, 1988). Cheney (1983a, 1983b) positioned organizational identification as a critical process wherein individuals internalize the values of and associates the self with an organization. Though research into the nature of identification and its role in organizing has largely focused corporate contexts (e.g. Brown, 1969; Cheney, 1983a; Scott et al., 1998), researchers have extended identification to religious organizations (Adler, 1995; Driskill & Camp, 2006). However, given the evolving nature of the contemporary church, it is crucial to understand how changes in religious organizing create nuance in member

experience. In their exploration of the Mars Hill Megachurch, Garner and Peterson (2018) found that, even in the process of exiting, members tended to characterize their identity in terms of distance from the church—despite the abuse members faced within the organization. Of course, not all megachurches abuse their members, but, given the profound impact of religion on the formation and expression of individual identity, especially as churches wrestle with their own organizational practices and their implications for member identity (McNamee, 2011), modern megachurches are a critical site for investigating the complex interaction between identification and organizing Discourses[2].

Further, terms like "evangelical" and "seeker-sensitive" are an important part of megachurch Discourse and take on a different meaning than normative religious contexts. First, within megachurches, the role of evangelism is transformed. Bazanini and Machado (2018) argued that the megachurch operates in a symbolic market of religious goods that fundamentally alters the process of obtaining and retaining new church members. They articulated that participation in this market mechanism necessitates a reinterpretation of organizational and theological commitments to values, thus elevating the role of evangelism from a theological good to a practical necessity. Second, Wade (2016) articulated the ways that megachurches associated with the seeker-sensitive movement appropriate the mechanisms and strategies advocated and examined in social scientific research as a means of retaining membership. Shibley (1998) described the ways that seeker-sensitive church aims to allay the fears of those who approach the church while affirming rather than damning both the individual and the world at large. Research has examined this seeker-sensitive nature as a process of enchantment and

[2] When not capitalized, discourse simply represents talk, the use of language in social relationships. However, capitalized Discourse refers to larger contexts of language and social practice (Gee, 2011).

revealed that, in certain contexts, this movement reflects the Goffmanian total institution insofar as it subsumes both the individual and the society and reinvents them in the context of the megachurch (Wade, 2016). In this manner, the role of identification processes within the church are key. As the individual both evangelizes and is evangelized, as individuals see their identities and worlds reinvented in the church's terms, these processes emerge in talk and text, in discourse and Discourse, and therefore must be examined from a communicative perspective.

The Corporatized Megachurch

From a communicative standpoint, the emergence of competitive church "markets" raises questions about the ways in which strategic practices of a "competitive" megachurch transform the process of organizing itself and alter the social nature of the church and its impact on members. Though the modern church still plays a clear role in the evolving politics of everyday life, Deetz (1992) argued that corporations have replaced religious organizations as the primary social institution in modern life. Research regarding the position megachurches have in society has largely focused on the ways megachurches have changed the traditional functioning of the church (Putnam, 2000). Hong (2006) described the emergence of megachurches on an international level as a process of "McDonaldization" (p.239) and "Charismatization" (p. 239). This process, Hong argued, is a reaction to the need for physical displays of progress—specifically in terms of size—as an indication of success or value within the market of religious institutions. Maddox (2016, p. 146) referred to this fixation as the "gospel of growth" and linked its emergence as a societal necessity in the context of capitalist society. This research tends to describe a central characteristic of the role of the modern megachurch: rather than shaping society the society in which it functions, society has begun to shape the church, and although Maddox (2016) related this transformation of the church to specific economic and societal

forces, researchers in communication studies are uniquely poised to examine how these colonizing forces (Deetz, 1992) and spectacle (Best & Kellner, 2001; Debord, 1967/1995)transform the process of organizing.

Megachurches have become a prominent and unique form of religious organizing by taking the normative concept of the Christian church and extending it to Brobdingnagian proportions, but the ways in which megachurches organize and affect their members differ in more than just size. Whereas research on megachurches often focuses on organizing as a means of managing the size of their membership, Maddox (2016) urged inquiry to look beyond size. Examinations of megachurch organizing have described the highly bureaucratic nature of megachurch organizing (Sanders, 2014). The modern megachurch has embraced corporate forms of organizing to such a degree that renowned management scholar Drucker suggested that the megachurch is the only functioning organization in society today (Pew Research Center, 2005). This, of course, is a curious evolution in the church as bureaucracy is largely associated with secular organizing. Pritchard's (1995) examination of the Willow Creek megachurch described how the church echoed corporate designs, highlighting neutrality and a contemporary atmosphere. Maddox (2016) argued that this appropriation of corporate or bureaucratic organizing was one borne out of necessity as an adaptation of the ethos of capitalism. In other words, the corporatization of the church became necessary to maintain credibility as an institution in a modern capitalist society.

Further, this highly bureaucratic organizing extends megachurches' reach when regarding political, economic, and social advocacy. This, in turn, indicates a further transformation of religious organizing within the megachurch. Some researchers have praised the ways that megachurches, as faith-based organizations, have fueled welfare and economic development

programs in their local communities in ways that are only possible with a congregation of such size and means (Owens & Smith, 2005). Simultaneously, other, more critical looks at megachurches have characterized megachurches as products of capitalist incursion into religious spaces, fueled by a constant drive for growth and the production of a good for consumption (Sanders, 2014). Both perspectives offer an account of megachurch organizing that is fundamentally shaped by an increased reach into members' lives and communities. Karnes, McIntosh, Morris, and Peason-Merkowitz (2007) articulated the overarching implication of this new form of religious organizing, however, by emphasizing that megachurches are poised to fundamentally transform entire communities through social, economic, and political influence. The political focus of the megachurch is drawn further into question in the context of Roozen's (2015) recognition that the vast majority (over 70 percent) of megachurches identified as conservative. Further, churches, over time, have been trending towards being more conservative (Roozen, 2015). Though it is clear that the church has never been a neutral actor politically, economically, or socially, the increasing reach into member lives by the contemporary megachurch is of increasing importance insofar as the corporatized nature of the megachurch transforms this process of affecting individuals' lives and altering discursive meaning-making processes (Deetz, 1992).

Study Rationale

In a special edition of *Communication Studies,* Buzzanell and Harter (2006) lamented the ways in which organizational communication theory privileges paid work and consumer relationships as a product of secular hegemony within the field. Later, Ward (2015) argued for a framework of religious study that incorporated organizational theory as a means of understanding the influence and practice of religious organizing. This is not to say that research

regarding megachurches within communication studies is entirely absent. Rhetorical analyses have examined the use of large-scale video displays (Gilmore, 2008), religious recruitment in megachurches (Caswell, 2007), and the dissemination of American cultural values in megachurches (Baab, 2008). In addition to these rhetorical analyses, social scientific work has (a) detailed the influence of the emerging megachurch on religious marketing (Yip & Ainsworth, 2016), (b) examined how megachurches refer to and characterize health conditions on church websites (Campbell & Wallace, 2015), and (c) investigated discourses of personalization within online preaching (Bryan & Albakry, 2016). However, these investigations, along with others in the social science traditions, have studied megachurches from perspectives that discount or entirely ignore the perspectives of the members whose experiences are constitutive of the megachurches themselves. And given the insights offered by Garner and Peterson (2018) on the nature of megachurch organizing and its impacts on members, additional work must follow in this vein. Garner and Peterson (2018), therefore, presented a clear foundation for continued social scientific, qualitative (and critical), inquiry regarding megachurches and organizational processes.

Despite the growing prevalence of research focusing on the influence of religion on communicative practices (e.g. Adler, 1995; Driskill & Camp, 2006) and organizational research on religious organizing (e.g., Hinderaker, 2015; Garner & Peterson, 2018), relatively little work has examined the emergence of megachurches as it relates to organizational and identity processes. From critical-qualitative and organizational perspectives, this paucity of inquiry is as evident as it is curious. Given their heavily bureaucratic nature (Sanders, 2014), examining religious organizing practices in the context of megachurches seems an ideal site to merge organizational and religious communication research.

Thus, this study seeks to extend the body of literature on megachurches from the perspective of organizational communication. Whereas sociological and religious scholars have examined how the evolution of the megachurch has changed church practices, this study seeks to examine how these transformations in the megachurch emerge in the everyday accounts of the members who live the organizational reality and participate in the spectacle of the megachurch. From an organizational communication perspective, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on religious organizing and its interaction with the corporate forces/foci that have come to dominate both organizational practice and organizational studies.

To this end, this study's methodology will reflect the postmodern approach to critical-qualitative social science. By treating recounted member experience as emplotted narrative (Boje, 2001), this study will employ a tripartite data collection that includes ethnography, interviews with members, and document collection. These three methods of data collection not only allow the researcher to have a closer, contextual understanding of organizational practices, through ethnography, but they also facilitate the critical investigation of members' lived experience as they emerge through their recounted narrations and the intertextual web of organizational documents (Boje, 2001; Frow & Morris, 1993). For the purposes of this study, ethnography was conducted for six weeks at both churches. During this time, the researcher attended worship services and recorded fieldnotes from these experiences

Given the varied nature of these data and the theoretical approach of this study, data analysis must be undertaken in such a way that examines the polyphony and polysemy that emerge from these intertextual representations of organizational narrative. Thus, a story deconstruction analysis (Boje, 2001) will guide the interpretation of the data. Building on the Derridean concept of deconstruction, Boje's (2001) story deconstruction analysis treats emergent

deconstruction as an antenarrative that guides the emplotment of organizational narrative. In this sense, deconstruction represents the instability of language as it emerges in meaning making processes guided by value laden premises. Using deconstruction to analyze organizational narrative allows both an emic look at organizational sensemaking as it is shaped by antenarrative forces and facilitates a critical examination of those power centers, or logocentrisms (Derrida, 1967/1997), that guide the process.

Megachurches Examined in This Study

The ethnographic and narrative nature of this study necessitates a cursory understanding of the theological and practical underpinnings of the churches examined here. The researcher examined two megachurches for this study. Both are located in the southern United States and have an average of over 25,000 individuals in weekly attendance, placing both churches in the top 10 largest megachurches in the United States. The first of these, Apex Church, is a nondenominational, charismatic Christian megachurch with multiple campuses in the surrounding area and an affiliate campus over 1,000 miles from the main campus of the church. The second church, Unity Church, is also a nondenominational megachurch with an average of 25,000 members in weekly attendance. However, Unity Church began as an affiliate of a local Baptist church and was, therefore, associated with the Southern Baptist Convention. It later became inactive within the convention and eventually transitioned to its current nondenominational status. Perhaps because of its origins in the Southern Baptist Convention, Unity Church is considered an evangelical megachurch and is part of the "seeker sensitive" movement as described above. Unity Church consists of nine separate locations with three out-of-state locations.

The chapters that follow will explore the complex nature of identification processes in

these two megachurches. Following this introductory chapter, the review of literature will examine and present the relevant literature regarding the theoretical framework of this study. The review will discuss the specific literature on organizational identification, the (ante)narrative paradigm, and the critical dramaturgical perspective as they inform the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The third chapter will present the methodology and procedures used in this study, flesh out the tripartite data collection, and explain the story deconstruction method of analysis. The fourth chapter will detail the results of this analysis, and chapter five will conclude the study with a discussion of the theoretical implications and a restorying of the megachurch.

CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Megachurches, insofar as they are more than simply large churches, are a curiosity. They are simultaneously religious entities that function in similar manners to other such entities, but they organize in ways reminiscent of corporations. This study will examine megachurch organizing as a structurational process of identification. Essentially, by understanding the ways megachurch organizational practices transforms individual identities and shapes members' values and beliefs, this examination will foreground the underlying symbolic processes that simultaneously facilitate and legitimize megachurch organizing. Further, this framework will treat members' tellings of their lived experiences as story and organizational practice as performed narrative. Treating lived experience as narrative exposes the power dynamics, privileged voices, and Discourses that shape the individuals' understanding of the world, the organization, and themselves. Last, considering the performative nature of organizing narratives, this study will situate this examination of member narratives within a theatrical metaphor of critical dramaturgy that highlights the spectacular nature of capitalist theatrics and its interrelation with corporate colonizing forces.

Thus, this review of literature begins with scholarly work in structurational organizational identification put forth by Scott et al. (1998) to set the groundwork for understanding how the organizing process shapes individual values and identity. However, this study questions this interrelation of organizing and identity as a value-laden process of narrative control. Thus, the following section reviews the literature of Fisher's (1984, 1989) narrative paradigm and Boje's (2001, 2008, 2017) postmodern organizational storytelling theory. Finally, this review examines megachurches through a lens of critical dramaturgy that understands the organizing process as performed narrative shaped by societal Discourse. To this end, the chapter will conclude with an

enumeration of the critical dramaturgical approach (Boje, 2017), informed by Deetz's (1992) notion of corporate colonization, that theorizes of organizing processes as narrative performance characterized by postmodern spectacle (Best & Kellner, 2001; Debord 1967/1995).

Organizing and Identifying

Questions of identification and its role in the organizing process are central to organizational inquiry and, in turn, have transformed the ways that researchers examine the interrelation between organizing and its influence over the individual. Much of the contemporary work examining organizational identification from a communicative standpoint builds upon Cheney's (1983a, 1983b) application of Burkean identification; As Cheney (1983a) argued, persuasion is fundamental to organizing and can be understood as the symbolic exchange that lays the foundation for social relations. Within the context of organizing identification is the persuasive process by which individuals begin to understand themselves in terms of the values and ideas of the organization. Further, relying upon Gidden's (1984) structurational view of the organization, Scott et al. (1998) offered a structurational view of organizational identification that positions identification as a duality of product and process. Both of these aspects of organizational identification seek to understand the relationship between organizational processes and social identity; however, postmodern and critical approaches toward examining this relationship problematize the entanglement of the corporate and the individual identity (Deetz, 1992) and the power-laden dynamics of narratively shaped identity. For this study, then, this section will review the perspectives on organizational identification and its relation to social identity, present the view of structurational identification, and examine postmodern and critical approaches to identification.

Identification and Social Identity

Within the rhetorical traditions of the communication discipline, the concept of identification evokes Kenneth Burke's (1945) meditations on persuasion and linguistic form. Identification is central to persuasion and to communication overall because it acts to counterbalance the division inherent in society and in language because it is the symbolic process that underscores our social relations with others (Burke, 1945). Simply, people identify with others and thereby understand others. George Cheney (1983a) adapted this philosophical/rhetorical understanding of identification and cast studies of organizational identification in its mold. Instead of conceiving of identification as an extant motivational, or other, factor within an organization (e.g., Brown, 1969), Cheney (1983a, 1983b) returned identification to its communicative underpinnings in rhetorical theory and argued for its central influence over organizing as a communicative process.

Cheney (1983a, 1983b) argued that not only is identification a fundamentally communicative process, but it also simultaneously lays the symbolic foundation for communication and organizing. Whereas previous studies of organizational identification examined its influence on effective and satisfying organizing (Brown, 1969; Patchen, 1970; Lee, 1971), critics of those studies, among other early examinations of identification assert that this work conflated identification with other similar constructs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and abstracted away the role of communication in these processes. Insofar as identification represents the symbolic means through which people understand each other, without a common groundwork for communicating in the context of organizing the process simply cannot occur. Cheney's (1983a, 1983b) reconceptualization of the role of identification in organizing, and its link to Burke's (1957) recognition of the corporate construction of the individual 'I' from

multiple corporate, collective 'we's, provides a framework for all forms of scholarly inquiry that regards identification as a communicative manifestation of identity constitution in terms of various organizing influences.

Structurational Identification

Anthony Giddens' (1984) work on the *Constitution of Society* through structuration theory offered an ontological framework for understanding the process of organizing. Structuration theory presents organizing as the result of structures – rules and resources – that constitute organizational practice and reproduce those practices. Structurational identification answers this call to think differently about organizational processes. Whereas Gidden's (1984) view of structures sought to examine the development and legitimation of an organizational reality in terms of communicative practice, Scott et al. (1998) extended this concept to the interplay between organizing and individual identity. Essentially, the structurational view of identification positions identity as a structure — as rules and resources that are drawn upon and reified contextually — and not as an ossified, extant referent (Scott et al., 1998). This positions individual identity as a fundamentally malleable, changeable product of communicative practices and organizing discourses.

Initially, Scott et al. (1998) articulated the dual nature of identification as process and product. As process, identification shapes emergent identity through a generative process of organizational discourse and practices. In a similar manner to Giddens' (1984) treatment of organizational rules and resources, the structurational approach to identification sees identity as a fixed entity only insofar as it is reified through communicative practices. In other words, as Discourses shape and mold extant identity in terms of organizational or societal values and meaning-making processes, those Discourses draw up on identity narratives (Larkey & Morrill,

1995) to make sense of practice. Identity, in this view, is the product of organizational Discourse and is structured and shaped in terms of individuals' attachment to said Discourse. Along the lines of social identity literature (e.g. Ashforth & Mael., 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1985), this view of identity positions individual identity as a collective of organizational discourses that facilitate sensemaking of experience and practice while simultaneously shaping the individuals' experience of the organization (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). In this sense, identity not only helps the individual make sense of self but also characterizes the collective understanding necessary to interact with other individuals in the process of organizing. Overall, the structurational view understands identification-identity as dialectical that makes sense of organizational discourse and practice while shaping identity to conform to those practices.

Identity and Control

Though structurational identification lays the framework for understanding discursive construction of identity/identification in the process of organizing, postmodern approaches to organizational inquiry question how oppressive societal Discourses and fragmented experience shape this process. The postmodern approach applied in this study seeks to examine how identity formation, situated in organizational discourse, systematically distorts individual views of the self and of society. In this vein, Deetz (1992) argued that corporate influences over individual identity have colonized understanding of the world and systematically distorted our means of communicating opposition to capitalist Discourses. This act of colonizing shapes how individuals organize their understanding of the world through talk by changing the language they use to make sense of lived experience. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) argued that postbureaucratic organizing centers around identification processes insofar as the inculcation of values shapes the decision-making processes for members (Schrodt, 2002). Tompkins and

Cheney's (1985) concept of concertive control illustrates how ideology and values can shape individual actions without exerting force on the individual. Power can shape individual action through repression and coercion or through a generative process that crafts norms and values (Foucault, 1975/1995); in this way, as it shapes individuals' values, identification processes represent an emergent power dynamic that manifests in organizational control of the individual in insidious, unnoticed ways.

Critical and postmodern research regarding the interrelation between organizational identification and power structures maintained much of the structurational understanding of the identity-identification dialectic while arguing for a more complex understanding of the interplay. Whereas Kuhn and Nelson (2002) demonstrated the profound implications of the duality of identification, insofar as it shapes how the individual understands themselves and the organization, postmodern theorists argued for a more complex contemplation of this interrelation. Specifically, from a narrative perspective, Johansen (2017) argued for a complexity approach to understanding of the interplay between individual identity and the process of narrating organizational realities. Beyond providing a framework for understanding and experiencing the organization (e.g. Kuhn & Nelson, 2000), identity formational processes within organizations can colonize the individual voice, even in counter-institutional spaces of dissent (Hinderaker, 2017). In this sense, identity formational processes of organizing set the stage, as it were, for the usurpation of the individual voice. Within the context of religious organizing, Hinderaker (2015) described how the extent of organizational reach, or the totalistic quality of organizations, transforms individual identity and other social relationships.

Theories of organizational identification allows an investigation of complex discursive processes that, at once, seek to control individuals within organizational contexts through

unobtrusive means (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) and colonize their voices to transform counter-institutional advocacy into a reification of organizational legitimacy (Hinderaker, 2017). Beyond conceiving of identification as a value-laden process, examining the interplay of identity and identification processes offers researchers the opportunity to understand how members' lives are changed by both organizational narrative and societal Discourse. Thus, within the context of this examination of megachurches, understanding organizational identification as the complex interplay between processes of identity formation and organizational sensemaking positions this study to examine the nature of members' narrated experience as a manifestation of emergent organizational identification.

A(nte) Narrative Organizational Paradigm

Narrative paradigms in organizational communication (and in the field in general) do not simply seek to examine the phenomena of narrative and story; rather, they treat the study of narrative as a recognition that the social world is communicated, created, and recreated in the ways that people tell the stories of their lives. As a decidedly communicative approach to the examination of the social world, communication researchers have embraced the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1984, 1989) as a means of explaining and understanding culture (Ehrenhaus, 1993), family (Kellas, 2007; Langellier & Peterson 2006a, 2006b), resiliency (Frank, 1995; Horstman, 2019), social influence (Green & Brock, 2000), and more. By understanding social, communicative phenomena as narrative, the paradigm recognizes a cyclical co-construction of social reality and story. Individuals do not simply make sense of the world in terms of narrative, they construct it *through* story (Mumby, 1993). As they emplot understanding of the social world into sequence and story, individuals' narratives cement notions of cause and effect (Nietzsche, 1967), embed ideological centers into social realities (Derrida, 1967/1997), and craft senses of

the “chaotic soup” of experience (Boje, 2001, p. 1) into self-legitimizing logics. This is the power of/in narrative. However, some theorists have challenged the decidedly modern approach to understanding story and its relation to the social world that most narrative research employs. Specifically, Boje (2001, 2008, 2017) rebutted the realist take on narrative shared by the theoretical approach to the single-voiced, linear narrative. And considering the Structurational, postmodern approach to identification outlined above, the understanding of human communication as narrative presented here will embrace the fractures and the polysemy inherent in storied experiences. To this end, this section will offer a brief overview of the normative narrative approach, present Boje’s (2001, 2008, 2017) antenarrative view, and detail the application of the antenarrative view to organizing.

The Role of Narrative

Walter Fisher (1984, 1989) initially described the narrative paradigm as an alternative to a rational world paradigm that treats humans as essentially rational beings where argument and analysis are the acts of being human. Instead of positioning persons as fundamentally rational, the narrative paradigm conceives of us, fundamentally, as storytellers: *homo narrans* (Fisher, 1984, 1989). But what is this concept of narrative? What is story? Fisher (1989) theorized of narrative as a process of symbolic action in which, through sequences of words and deeds, individuals craft meaning through story for those who tell and hear narratives. Czarniawska (1997) offered a similar, more narrow definition of narrative as an emplotted account that, at a base level, requires “an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs” (p. 2). Essentially, then, narratives are accounts of events that, through chronology, bind occurrences together and attribute a sense of causality and coherence to experience. This conceptual frame of narrative places communication as central to understanding human action

and behavior by conceiving of persons as *homo narrans*—symbol using beings who communicate and understand through story (Fisher, 1984). Thus, the narrative paradigm situates communication as the central means of both constructing and understanding social relations. As *homo narrans,* narrative is simultaneously how individuals communicate and construct knowledge claims (Bruner, 1986; 1990); it shapes the process of understanding the world, communicating that understanding of the world, and constructing the social world itself.

By reconsidering the assumption that humans are fundamentally rational beings, and instead, conceiving of humans as fundamentally storytellers narrating actions, the narrative paradigm recognizes how individuals make sense of others' lives and their own lives in terms of narratives (MacIntyre, 1978). Although Fisher (1984) positioned the narrative paradigm as an alternative to the rational world paradigm, it serves more as a subsumption of that paradigm by characterizing rationality as the product of narrated logics. In this sense, the narrative paradigm argues that individuals do not rely upon a traditional notion of rationality; human behavior does not rely upon either objective laws of rationality or normative laws that exist externally. Rather, individuals act and narrate the action retrospectively to offer an understanding of human behavior in the aftermath of action (Fisher, 1984). In the language of the narrative, the truth in an account bears no relation to any objective sense of verifiability. The truth manifests from the narrative's own sense of coherence and plausibility (Bruner, 1990). The retrospective act of narrating and understanding human action as a process of sensemaking embeds within these narratives the necessary logic and rationale that justifies the actions of the past (Weick, 1995). Instead of a prospective rationality that guides human behavior, retrospective acts of sensemaking shape the individuals' sense of narrative rationality by assimilating recent experience and actions into our already established narrative of the world and behavior.

This narrative sense of 'the rational' establishes the critical link between the narrative and the social. Narrative is not simply an individual phenomenon. Rather, the individual narration of experience takes part in a larger discursive struggle for collective meaning as part of an ongoing, never-ceasing, dialogic construction of histories (Burke, 1957). Czarniawska (1998), citing William James (1890), described the world as a "buzzing, pulsating, formless mass of signals, out of which people try to make sense, into which they attempt to introduce order" (p. 1). This represents narrative in motion. At a micro level, individuals organize and conceive of lived experience through narrative. These micronarratives shape, and are shaped by, the societal grand narrative and metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984). Grand narratives, or "regimes of truth" as Brown (1991, p. 192) described them, do not simply guide the interpretation of an objective reality; they exist as living, breathing macronarratives that are continually negotiated and legitimized by the micronarratives that draw upon them to make sense of experience. However, as micronarratives depend on grand narrative to make sense of lived experience, they engage in a mutually co-constructive act where the grand narrative legitimates and shapes the narrated experience of the individual and the micronarrative itself shapes the macronarrative as part of the discursive act.

The process of discursively negotiating macronarratives reflects the narrative struggle over meaning, leading some theorists to abandon the notion of the "society" as an object of study altogether. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argued that society is an impossibility maintained by social forces and power dynamics. Rather than a monolith of 'society' that can be perceived or understood as an entity, this conception of narratively constructed social reality acknowledges that the social relations that characterize human interactions are no more real than the narratives that construct and make sense of them. However, this view does not deny the materiality of these human interactions—it does not necessitate a journey into The Matrix or a rejection of objective

reality; it argues that socially constructed narratives mediate our understanding of those material conditions and any connection to an objective reality. Simply, the materiality of human interaction is product of narrative social constructions. The narrative paradigm, then, views relations, institutions, and organizations as dialogically constructed narratives that shape the process of understanding and experiencing the world; guided by internalized nodal points to manufacture "the impossible object" of a coherent vision of a society; and maintained and understood through human communication (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Antenarratology

The narrative paradigm serves as a powerful approach to understanding the link between communicative practice and the creation of our social world; however, some theorists have argued that the reliance on archetypes, coherence, and linear, single-voiced narratives prevents narrative theory from accounting for those stories that exist prior to, and beyond, the enforced order of plot. The imposition of order and the interplay of micro- and macronarrative in making sense of individual experience is critical to understanding how hegemonic forces manufacture both the 'society' (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) and the consent to domination by that (civil) society (Gramsci, 1971) — or by the organization (Burawoy, 1979). Whereas the narrative paradigmatic perspective presented above acknowledges that the process of organizing experience into coherent narratives is affected by grander societal narratives (Lyotard, 1984), it treats these metanarratives themselves as coherent, single-voiced narratives in and of themselves. However, this seems at odds with the polysemy and plurivocality that characterize the varied interpretations and voicings of these supposedly singular societal narratives. Boje (2001, 2008, 2017) offered the postmodern approach of antenarrative—fragmented narrative that exists prior to and serves as a prospective bet (ante, as in poker) on the future of the narrative—as an answer

to this theoretical dilemma.

Distinguishing between story and narrative serves as the foundation of an antenarrative view. With few exceptions, the normative narrative paradigm presents the distinction between narrative and story as either negligible or nonexistent. Boje (2001) conceived of the two concepts as fundamentally disparate. Whereas story represents the individuals' immediate, incoherent recounting and experiencing of events, the narrative form enforces order on those recollections, emplotting them, and lending the appearance of coherence with respect to pre-existing narrative discourses. Antenarrative is more than an encoding fragment of narrative that guides coherence from chaotic experience (as story); it is the fragmented and polysemous manifestation and interpretation of societal discourse as it emerges in the individual sensemaking process. Gallie (1965) presented the notion of followability as a criterion for evaluating this distinction by separating the chaotic, experiential nature of story and the structured recounting of narrative. If others can follow the recounted experience, it is organized and encoded in such a way that the chaos of experience can be, in some way, relayed to another individual using plot. More simply, as antenarratives shape a member's experience of organizing, they simultaneously create a shared, discursive foundation for organizing. Much like language itself, antenarratives impact both the words individuals use to make sense of the world around them *and* allow others to grasp their communicated world view insofar as there is a shared linguistic foundation.

However, this process of organizing lived story into a 'coherent' message embeds value-laden propositions into the emplotted narrative. Ricouer (1983/2012) noted that narrative accounts rely upon a separate narrative Discourse to cohere. Without link to a 'grander' narrative that ties the individual account or experience to organizational or societal context, the narrative becomes incoherent. Simultaneously, as the emplotment of story into narrative relies upon larger

Discourse to make sense of the individual experience, the act of emplotment shapes the overarching narrative. This coalesces with the larger narrative paradigmatic view that current experience is reconciled with past events to form a coherent, seemingly whole narrative (Fisher, 1984). The antenarrative view theorizes of these encoding "narratives" as unemplotted fragments rather than as coherent narratives in and of themselves. Instead, they emerge *within* coherent narrative as polysemy and plurivocality. However, in the context of a society that is narrated into being, the prospective force of the fragmented antenarrative reproduces and reifies itself by lending coherence and a furthered sense of legitimacy to individuals' emplotted accounts of experience while simultaneously functioning as a speculative forebet on future sensemaking and narration. The power of the antenarrative, then, is to not only organize and cohere chaotic story and individual experience but also to propagate value-laden, sometimes oppressive, Discourses and position them as necessary to have even foundational validity or coherence within an organizational or societal context.

Antenarrative and Organizing

Shifting the perspective of a narrative paradigmatic view toward the more postmodern examination of story/antenarrative/narrative interplay facilitates a deeper understanding of the social construction of discursive organizing narratives instead of an extant "organization." Whereas the narrative paradigm, through the examination of cemented or petrified narratives (as in Czarniawska, 2004) ignored often fragmented or unstable nature of organizing, Weick (1976) and Boje (2008) urged research to conceptualize of organizing as a dynamic and discursive process that eschews the appearance of permanency in narrative. Instead, Boje (2008; 2011) argued that theorizing of story as an organizational sensemaking currency better facilitates an understanding of the complexity of organizing as an ongoing process that relies upon the

exchange of information through simultaneous story and narrative to take place discursively, shaped by antenarrative, and characterized by polysemy.

The antenarrative approach to examining organizing narratives explains the polysemy inherent in the process through the concept of *Tamara* – used simultaneously as a reference to the Krizanc (1981) play and as a discursive metaphor that illustrates the participatory nature of interpreting and crafting lived story (Boje & Dennehy, 1993; Boje, 1995). The foundation of the *Tamara* metaphor rejects the linear narrative that characterizes much of the modernist approach to narratology. *Tamara* is an immersive play by John Krizanc (1981) that, instead of a linear presentation of drama on the traditional proscenium, invites the audience into a mansion to follow and interact with the characters. Experiential drama splinters the story of the play into incoherent fragments that the audience must then, individually, piece together. But the audience members' interpretation of the same "drama" depends on their own path through the rooms and plot lines and characters and time. The complexity of the drama, then, obliterates the beginning-middle-end conception of the narrative process (Czarniawska, 2004) as the immediate experience of incoherent story and emplotted narrative become one (Boje, 2008). Not only does this *Tamara* metaphorically encapsulate the fragmentation of lived story but also reflects the dialogic aspects of the storytelling organization whereby individuals within the organization make sense of those goings-on they are not witness to through conversation, the exchange of simultaneous story and narration. And given this *Tamara* of the storytelling, Boje (2008; 2015) urged a turn from a systematic perspective on sensemaking towards a complex, dynamic interwoven process that reflects the ever-shifting, fragmented nature of organizing.

The simultaneous story/narration in the *Tamara* of the storytelling organization demonstrates the power of the antenarrative in understanding the organizing process. Not only

does the antenarrative prospectively guide the sensemaking process within the organization, it lends legitimacy to certain perspectives, privileges certain voices, and positions certain Discourses as necessary referents to be considered coherent in the context of the organization. In this sense, antenarrative embeds oppressive structures within the narrated logics of organizational storytelling in a manner reminiscent of Gramsci's (1971) work on manufactured consent and the normalization of oppression through hegemonic forces. Insofar as antenarrative creates coherence and foundational validity in organizational contexts, the inculcation of repressive Discourses that silence individuals occur in an insidious fashion. Within an organizational context, the power of antenarrative colonizes individual sensemaking processes in terms of repressive discourse and necessitates reference to that antenarrative for that storied experience to cohere into intelligible narrative. For example, Hinderaker (2017) analyzed how antenarratives colonized the voices of oppositional movements to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints such that dissenters voiced their opposition to the organization in the language of the organization itself. Further, the polysemous manifestation of antenarrative as fragmented and unplotted story that exists "beyond coherence" makes its identification and examination critical to understanding the narrative dynamics of organizing (Boje & Henderson, 2011). In this sense, the fragmentation of the antenarrative prevents members from pinning it down or interrogating an objective, stable sense of antenarrative; antenarratives are, by their nature chaotic and dynamic.

Coupled with the malleable nature of discursive organizing processes, the prospective power of antenarrative links organizational change and narration (Boje, 2012). Antenarrative emerges in the embedded story of networked individuals and narratives within organizing. It is in the stories of the "little people" of the organization; it is in the grand narratives that shape

sensemaking throughout the organization and beyond (Boje, 2001, p.45). Antenarrative, in this framework, is simply a theoretical mechanism to understand the ways that fragmented Discourse shapes the individual and collective experience of organizing. However, as discussed above, it is not a neutral phenomenon. Antenarrative discursively shapes oppressive narrative. It can also establish a framework for restorying and transforming those narratives by embracing the dynamic nature of organizing. The next section in this chapter will utilize the postmodern approach to the (ante)narrative paradigm outlined here and frame it in terms of a critical dramaturgical approach to examining the discourses (organizational and societal) that shape this organizing process as a product of capitalist theatre.

Critical Dramaturgy

Whereas the postmodern approach to the narrative paradigm presented above outlines a means of examining organizing processes as the interplay of storied experience and narrative discourse, the critical dramaturgical view seeks to understand these organizational processes as metaphorical theatre within the context of overarching societal Discourses. Building from the work of Deetz (1997) on the mechanisms of corporate colonization, Debord (1979) and Best and Kellner (1997) on spectacle, Goffman's identity performance and frame analysis (1959, 1974), and the antenarrative work of Boje (2001, 2017), the critical dramaturgical approach to examining narrative organizing processes here seeks to understand how embedded societal Discourses, in the form of antenarratives, colonize the sensemaking process within and the individual experience of organizing through ideological megaspectacle. To elucidate this theoretical position, this section will expound upon the dramaturgical aspects of this theoretical approach, apply Deetz's notion of corporate colonization to this theatrical frame, and conclude with an examination of the role of spectacle in bringing these elements together as a critical

dramaturgical perspective on organizational theatre.

Organizational Theater

Understanding the performance and theatre speech acts has been central to communicative approaches to organizing dating back to Aristotle's conception of the poetic septet (Aristotle, trans. 1996), Burke's pentad (1945), and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis of self-presentation. The critical dramaturgical approach extends this theatrical framework to conceive of organizational studies as the examination of organizing as enacted dramatic narrative. Contra the organization as an extant object of analysis, the critical dramaturgical approach conceives of the "organization" as a narratively constructed, discursively maintained drama that constituent members enact to make sense of the world (Weick, 1976). Insofar as this organizational narrative is enacted by its constitutive members, research can examine it as a performative, communicative act (Boje & Rosile, 2003). Thus, the critical dramaturgical perspective frames the construction, maintenance, enactment, and analysis of organizational narratives (as presented above) as performative interaction that shapes the narrative processes described in the previous section. Whereas the narrative paradigm describes the sensemaking process as it occurs within organizational narratives (Weick, 1976), shaped by antenarrative (Boje, 2008), the critical dramaturgical lens expands this view to allow an examination of the theatrical production and re-enactment of these narratives as a performative theatre that constitutes organizing. And though the antenarrative view takes a postmodern approach towards the emplotment of lived experience in terms of oppressive discourse, the theatrical metaphor at the heart of critical dramaturgy provides a framework for considering the interaction of these fragmented Discourses with the material conditions of organizing and the spectacle of capitalist Discourses.

Corporate Colonization

The emergence of the modern corporation as an economic and legal force in business and social life has profoundly shaped the ways that individuals view the world, relate to each other, and understand themselves. Drucker (1972) recognized the corporation as a social institution with the ability to transform both economic and social norms. This recognition, Drucker argued, shapes the collective process of understanding and crafting a path forward for capitalist economies and, ostensibly, lies in contradistinction to Weber's (1930) analysis of the interrelation between economic forces and religious convictions. Deetz (1992) furthered Drucker's contention by illustrating both the degree to which and how corporate influences have "frequently, wittingly and unwittingly, replaced religious…institutions in the production of meaning, personal identity, values, knowledge, and reasoning" (p. 17). This is not to say that religious, or other institutions, play no role in shaping the discursive negotiation of meaning; however, by supplanting the influence of the Christian church as the primary social institution that shapes individuals' lives, corporate influences have, arguably, insinuated themselves into every aspect of the life world (Habermas, 1984) and colonized human voice as their own means of producing and reproducing.

Stanley Deetz 91992)explored the notion of corporate colonization in what can be considered one of the foundational texts of critical organizational communication studies, *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization: Developments in the Politics of Everyday Life*. Specifically, Deetz (1992) argued that corporate influences have *colonized* the life world by transforming the communicative processes of meaning-making. The crux of this argument encapsulates the ways in which corporate interests are spread communicatively, distorting the political aspects of lived experience, and limiting the discursive forums available to critically

examine the way that these forces shape society. The critical dramaturgical approach presented here takes Deetz's theoretical contribution and amplifies it to provide a background for understanding and examining larger economic processes at work within the context of corporate theatre in what Boje (2017) referred to as the theatres of capitalism. In this sense, the critical dramaturgical perspective argued for here seeks to subsume the notion of corporate colonization and theorize it as part of a larger theoretical framework where the forces of corporate colonization can be explained and furthered by treating capitalism as an antenarrative theatre.

Whereas Deetz's (1992) approach to embedded power dynamics relates more to the form of corporate organizing that has emerged *within* capitalist systems, the notion of corporate theatrics examines this colonizing force as a manifestation of fragmented and incoherent pre-narrations of everyday life. In other words, corporate colonization, as Deetz (1992) theorized it, is not the result of corporate organizing; it is a capitalist antenarrative that individuals perform in the theatres of organizing. Boje (2017) treated the processes of capitalism as part of a prospective antenarrative Discourse enacted in the organizational narratives of the society. This position radically transforms the understanding of capitalism from simply an economic philosophy or a context in which corporate colonization occurs. Instead, critical dramaturgical perspectives theorize of capitalism as an active antenarrative theatre that shapes the performance of organizational narratives and is maintained and legitimized through such performances. Capitalist theatrics act as antenarrative, as a fragmented and unplotted force, to shape the interpretation and the framing of the organizational realities of everyday life to which the audience as consumers are witness. As a theatre of action and as an antenarrative Discourse, capitalism can be understood as actively producing the organizational theatre, crafting social reality and shaping its interpretation at a narrative level that constitutive members then perform.

This approach, then, offers a clearer framework for examining the fragmented emergence of corporate colonization as antenarrative theatre while simultaneously affirming its influence on the communicative processes of meaning-making. As Deetz (1992) argued, the power of this colonization of the life world lies in its autobiographical construction of the corporation and the external world that justifies the corporation's own existence. Critical dramaturgy explores this theatrical enactment of this autobiographical narrative as a postmodern spectacle, and within the context of this study of megachurches, seeks to understand they ways in which societal Discourses shape the organizational theatre that manifests within and without the sanctuary.

Antenarrative Theatre and Spectacle

Understanding corporate colonizing forces as a process of performed antenarrative transforms the theoretical approach to understanding the way that capitalist influences shape meaning making processes dramatically. Capitalist theatre, in this view, relies upon the simultaneous fragmentation and unification of lived experience through performed spectacle (Boje, 2017). Spectacle has a dual role: to fragment and to unify. It is only though, first, crafting polysemous individual understanding that corporate forces can, consequently, attempt to unify and ossify meaning through collective memory. This is the fundamental contradiction in the spectacle, the concomitant fragmentation and unification that crafts the power of the spectacle (Debord, 1967/1995). As originally conceived in *Society of the Spectacle*, spectacle linked the exploitation of labor and the commodification of experience in mass media (Debord, 1967/1995); critical dramaturgy extended this concept of the spectacle and frames it as an antenarrative force of colonization in organizing (Boje, 2017).

To explain this process, Debord (1967/1995) articulated two types of spectacle, the concentrated and the diffuse. The concentrated spectacle unifies fragmented experience

becoming a “common ground of the deceived gaze” and acting to shape experience into a coherent and commodified whole that can be bought and sold (Debord, 1967/1995, p. 3). This concentrated spectacle crafts a unified picture of the world through false objectivity and Truth that depends upon the spectacle. The diffuse spectacle acts in the opposite manner to manufacture polysemy, create uncertainty, and, most critically, alienate the laborer/spectator from their labor and their society. Diffuse spectacle, in this sense, manufactures a society of isolated masses through mass media that transmogrifies the communicative process into a unilateral accumulation of messages in the mind of the spectator; specifically, Debord conceived of the diffuse spectacle in terms of manufactured subdivisions of society that define themselves in terms of the spectacle that divides them. Thus, spectacle acts both to alienate the individual from lived experience through fragmentation, exaggeration, and simulation *and* to provide solace through unifying lived experience through commodification. These two forms of spectacle craft a society of consumption where the masses are simultaneously isolated from each other and placated through constructed images of abundance. Spectacle acts both to alienate the individual from lived experience through fragmentation, exaggeration, and simulation *and* to provide solace through unifying lived experience through commodification. Further, it is only through the active construction of oppositional consciousness to these forces of spectacle that the “practical conditions of the present oppression” can be overturned (Debord, 1967/1995, p. 203).

Later, as a response to what he viewed as a historical falsification of the original conception of concentrated and diffuse spectacle, Debord (1990) turned to a new, more insidious framework for understanding spectacle. This new conception of the spectacle, the integrated spectacle, was theorized as a hybrid concentrated and diffuse spectacle that transforms the dialectical nature of the spectacle as originally presented (Debord, 1990). Here, the emergence of

the integrated spectacle is a "learnt new defensive technique" of a dynamic spectacle (Debord, 1990, p. 2). However, from this concept of the integrated spectacle, Best and Kellner (1997, 2001) crafted a postmodern approach to understanding spectacle. Initially, Best and Kellner (1997) conceptualized of the integrated spectacle as a result of media culture by drawing on Baudrillard (1981/1994), whereby the fatalism of Debord's later works serves as a reflection of the impossibility of throwing off the force of spectacle and the waning power of reason.

From the concept of the integrated spectacle, however, Best and Kellner (2001) theorized of a new understanding of postmodern spectacle, driven by the rapid growth in reach and breadth of mass media. Termed megaspectacle, this new concept of the spectacle reflects the pervasive nature of media's integration with spectacular discourse. The postmodern megaspectacle represents the permeation of advertising and media with the materiality of everyday life. Drawing on examples such as Las Vegas, integrated media theme parks, and the larger-than-life media dramas of the O. J. Simpson trial and the Clinton sex scandal, Best and Kellner (2001) illustrated how the postmodern megaspectacle of consumption fuels the capitalist economy. And while it differs from the original concept of the integrated media spectacle mainly in terms of reach (Debord, 1990; Best & Kellner, 1997), the megaspectacle also incorporates mechanisms of fetishization that largely focus on celebrity idols and icons whose apotheosis is a commodification of identity. Contra the unilateral communication of the diffuse spectacle, the megaspectacle invites the individual to join in, crafting a participatory audience that is at once consumer and manufacturer of spectacle as both spectator and spectated.

Whereas Best and Kellner (2001) theorized of interrelated megaspectacle and mass media, Boje's (2017) critical dramaturgical approach integrates the notion of megaspectacle with the examination of organizational theatrics. Boje's (2017) concept of organizational theatre relies

upon a similar inversion of the spectator/spectated relationship whereby the audience is invited on-stage to participate in the construction of the organizational narrative, through the antenarrative framing of the organizational process. The integration of the megaspectacle as a simultaneously unifying and fragmenting frame for organizational theatre is the last move in this approach to organizational communication. Critical dramaturgy, then, understands the megaspectacle as the frame, or meta-narrative, that unifies the experience of story/antenarrative/narrative interplay that results from the *Tamara* of organizational narrative. In the dramaturgical language, then, the organization is the performance of the constituent members and the megaspectacle is the colonized stage and the capitalist theatre wherein the players execute their part and perform their respective identities. For research, this approach invites inquiry regarding the nature of these legitimizing meta-narratives of megaspectacle, the colonizing influence of these capitalist Discourses, and the transformative interaction between this organizational theatre and individual identity. In the context of this investigation of identity and megachurches, this critical dramaturgical approach frames the investigation of narrative and performative interplay as it relates to the process of organizing and societal Discourses.

Research Questions

Whereas extant research has examined salient aspects of the nuances of organizing and identification within religious contexts (Adler, 1995; Driskill & Camp, 2006; Hinderaker, 2017), this study seeks to extend this line of inquiry to megachurches. Identifying lays the foundation for the collective, discursive process that is organizing itself (Cheney, 1983b). Insofar as this process of organizing can be understood as a narrative negotiation of meaning through fragmented story, this study will examine how megachurches find cohesion and a collective sense of organization, given the fragmented nature of the church experience and its large number

of constituent members. For something as personal as religious beliefs, forming cohesion in organizing so many individuals is of particular interest for communication scholars. Thus, by examining organizational identification as a narrated process shaped by antenarrative, this study asks:

RQ$_1$: How do members narrate their experiences of identifying with megachurches?

Due to their highly bureaucratic nature, polished branding, and subversion of religious norms, both in terms of their organizing and in their defiance of trends regarding religious membership (Pew Research Center, 2015; Thumma, 2001; Thumma & Bird, 2015), megachurches are a unique site for examining how corporate organizing has supplanted religious organizing as the primary social force in peoples' lives and how that societal shift has changed religious organizing. Corporatizing forces have fundamentally shaped the ways that individuals relate to each other hand has transformed organizing processes (Deetz, 1992). Though the protestant ethic may have driven the spirit of capitalism, this study seeks to examine how the capitalist spirit may have begun to shape the church and the ways that members narrate the megachurch experience. Specifically, by conceiving of corporate colonization as a force of antenarrative theatre under a critical dramaturgical lens, this study will treat recounted member narratives as products of retrospective sensemaking processes that simultaneously are guided by organizational antenarrative and societal antenarrative theatres of capitalism. Thus, to understand how corporate colonization transforms the organizing processes of the megachurch experience, this study asks:

RQ$_2$: How does corporate colonization shape megachurch members' narrated experiences?

Finally, the critical dramaturgical frame allows this inquiry of megachurch members'

narratives to investigate the nature of spectacle and its relation to the capitalist theatre of corporate organizing practices. Though the forces of corporate colonization shape the antenarrative theatrics of the organizing process, it is through spectacle that these fragmented Discourses can simultaneously cohere and fragment individual experience (Debord, 1967/1995). Research on the forces of spectacle has largely focused on media. Because of this fixation on media, explorations of spectacle in megachurches, as in other contexts, has focused on the use of video displays and visual effects (Gilmore, 2008). However, this study will subvert this normative explanation of the role of spectacle by examining how spectacular forces shape individual experiences as an antenarrative frame for the emergent capitalist theatrics of organizing. By going beyond the media involved, this study seeks to understand how spectacular discourse in the context of megachurches shapes the narrative sensemaking process for members. Thus, this study seeks to answer the final research question:

RQ$_3$: How does spectacle shape megachurch members' narrated experiences?

CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY

Investigating the nature of identification processes in megachurches as spectacular organizational theater necessitates interaction with organizations on many levels. Ethnographic experiences of attending church services and interviews facilitate a clearer understanding of church members' lived experiences. To this end, this study proposes a story deconstruction analysis (Boje, 2001) of a tripartite data collection that includes ethnographic data, interviews with members, and document collection. This approach recognizes that stories are neither stable or neutral; they self-deconstruct to reveal ideological centers and marginalized voices that shape power and members' experience of the organization and its values. This chapter details data collection procedures and explains the method of analysis that seeks to uncover these moments of deconstruction as emergent antenarrative.

Positioning This Study

An examination of identification processes within megachurches necessitates a method that provides not only a close connection to organizational practices under investigation but also privileges member voices. To understand the self-contained logics and truths of individuals' lived experiences, this study will treat members' accounts as narrative (Fisher, 1984) that is shaped by organizational antenarrative, or fragmented story that exists prior to emplotted narrative and shapes the future of organizing (Boje, 2001, 2008). Insofar as it guides the process of creating coherence from the chaos of experience (Boje, 2001), antenarrative goes beyond the single-voiced approaches of many narrative studies and reflects the interaction between organizational Discourse and member experiences. This treatment of lived experience as narrative facilitates a clearer understanding of how member voice both shapes, and is shaped by, organizational realities.

Further, this study seeks to uncover the role of antenarrative organizational theatrics and their interaction with narrative identification processes in megachurches. Exploring organizational practice as it emerges in spectacle warrants a method that provides researchers with their own lived experience as a participant and co-creator of the organizational experience. How better to understand spectacle, as it invites organizational members to abandon the passive role of spectator and join in the revelry, then to experience it? Ethnography provides key insights into organizational culture and allows the researcher to explore and unpack the nuances of organizing narratives as they emerge in theatric performance. Thus, this study embraces ethnography as a vital part in understanding organizing Discourses through first-hand experience.

Finally, it is necessary to recognize the role that narrative plays in the construction of this study. As Mumby (1993) argued, research itself functions as its own form of narrative control, imbuing our social science with the very power structures that researchers seek to uncover and examine. Thus, rather than taking up a false sense of objectivity and painting a monolithic picture of the organizations under study or giving up on the concept of meaningful research altogether, social science can create meaningful and defensible knowledge claims by treating research as part of an ongoing academic dialogue comprised of active and diverse scholarship that openly acknowledges the impossibility of unbiased or disinterested social science (Jermier, 1998). This acknowledgment, the ethnographic and narrative methods employed in this study, and a commitment to open, honest academic dialogue necessitates self-disclosure of the researcher's position. Specifically, it is important to note that the researcher, though raised as part of a small, Disciples of Christ church, has maintained no religious affiliation for the past ten years and has never been a member of the churches involved in this research. Though agnostic,

the researcher maintains no specific animus toward or biases for the organizations being studied or their members, nor is there any aim to defame or malign the megachurches examined in this study.

Deconstruction Analysis

Approaching a critical-qualitative analysis of varied texts of ethnography, member experiences, and organizational documents, researchers must be aware of the polyphony, fragmentation, and intertextuality inherent in the narrative process and select a means of analysis that acknowledges and embraces that interplay. Applying the Derridean concept of deconstruction to organizational narrative directs inquiry toward challenging those ideological monoliths, or nodal points (as in Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), that manifest in the "incomplete" totalities in organizational narratives. It allows us to reconstruct and resituate those organizational narratives to rewrite the script (Boje, 2001). As Alvesson and Deetz (2006) remind us, postmodern strategies such as Derridean deconstruction, strengthen social scientific approaches to organizational inquiry. Although deconstruction has been applied in some organizational studies to analyze isolated organizational narratives (Martin 1990; Boje, 1997) and ethnography (Linstead, 1993), this critical-qualitative social science approach seeks to embrace deconstruction more wholly with even more varied and expansive organizational texts. Within the context of this analysis of megachurches and the interrelation of spectacle, corporate colonization, and identification processes, deconstruction analysis can provide deeper insight into how organizational members speak ideological centers into existence and can transform them. So, this analysis will embrace a narrative reconstruction of deconstruction analysis outlined by David Boje (2001). By treating emergent deconstruction as antenarrative, this study

seeks to examine the narrative/antenarrative construction of ideological centers within organizational discourse.

The instability of language is central to the concept of deconstruction and, by extension, its analysis. Meaning making processes are inherently subjective and contextual and Derrida's (1967/1997) deconstruction embraces that recognition as a site of inquiry. To this end, Derrida (1967/197) argues that language is unstable in that the meaning of linguistic symbols can only be fixed in reference to some power or Discourse that distorts meaning making processes. For example, "the good book" could reference a well-kept ledger, an astute reservation for an event, or an invigorating fiction. These are mundane examples, but they illustrate the ways in which a "fixed" symbol can hold numerous meanings. Here, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) description of the relationship between economic, political, and social contexts and linguistic meaning as rhizomatic is particularly illustrative. They argue that, contra a hierarchical or root metaphor of meaning, understanding is shaped as a rhizome, a horizontal, unstructured assemblage, whereby "semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding" that shape our understanding (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). However, in language where binaries and nodes emerge, where there are structures and hierarchies, there are centers/censors (Cooper, 1989) of power that shape our understanding of these symbols; these are *logocentrisms,* artificially constructed logical centers, that Derrida (1967/1997) targets with the concept of deconstruction analysis. Where there is stability in language, there exists some center of power that drives our interpretations and roots our understanding and our production of our social world, but the delineation and exploration of those centers of power is best undertaken by examining the instances of instability in which they circumscribe themselves. This is the project of deconstruction.

Further to this point, the concept of unstable language, which is central to deconstruction analysis, does not imply any nihilistic reduction of the texts researchers seek to analyze. Deconstruction is not a negative phenomenon; it is not destruction. And by extension, the act of analyzing the emergence of deconstruction is not a negative or harmful endeavor. It is not a critique as it is normally connoted. Critics of deconstructive analysis argue that, at its foundation, it reduces language into relativism where any text can be interpreted in any way desired (Jones, 2004); however, although Derrida establishes a position that the meaning of language is continually negotiated in text and in context this does not deny the import of deconstructive readings (Sarup, 1988). Rather, acknowledging that meaning and language are negotiated in social processes that are steeped in power emphasizes the contribution of a deconstructive approach to research. Given the primacy with which Derrida refers to human voice and talk as a means of understanding the role of logocentrism (Sarup, 1988), there is a clear impetus for the application of this deconstruction approach to understanding organizing forces as they emerge in narrations of organizational experience.

Boje's (2001) articulation of a story deconstruction analysis links this deconstruction analysis to organizational narratives and collective sensemaking. In this sense, this analysis treats the ideological centers revealed through deconstructive readings as fragmented antenarrative that exists prior to and guides future narrative as a bet or 'ante'. As narratives self-deconstruct, they reveal the logical centers that operate like Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) notion of 'nodal points'. As individuals narrate experience, organizational context affects sensemaking and arranges the chaos of experience into emplotted narratives. Within organizational narrative, deconstruction analysis can be used to not only reveal the linguistic roots of meaning, as Derrida (1967/1997)

argues, but it can also target the equivocality and privileging of voices that systematically distort communication in organizational contexts (Deetz, 1992).

Data Collection

Meaningful critical-qualitative inquiry necessitates a method of collection that offers the researcher rich data through which to explore the members' lived experience and the wherewithal and personal experience to understand the emic meaning-making processes indigenous to organizations. Within organizational communication, ethnographers criticize interview-based research as superficial, failing to "penetrate the front" of an organization and individuals face-saving tendencies (Martin, Frost, & O'Neil, 2006); similarly, ethnography is problematic in that it fails to offer insight beyond that of the researchers' perspectives. However, researchers can use multiple data collection methods to not only ameliorate the shortcomings of certain methods, but to also provide deeper insight for research into the critical processes at work in organizations (as in Wilson, 2000). This study, then, proposes a tripartite collection including ethnography, interviews with church members, and collection of church documents. This tripartite collection allows for a closer understanding of the organizations under examination and, in turn, offers a more nuanced perspective for the interpretive analysis of participants' narrated experience.

For the purpose of this study, two Southern megachurches were selected based on proximity to the researchers and size. Both megachurches are among the top ten most attended megachurch congregations in the United States. The first, Apex Church, has over 28,000 members and is nondenominational. The other, Unity Church, has approximately 25,000 members, and though it was originally associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, Unity Church is no longer officially associated with the organization.

Ethnography

Boje (2017) argued that it is of the nature of antenarrative megaspectacle to dissolve the boundary between audience production—to invite the observer to become a participant in the production of the spectacle. To this end, ethnography, as the initial method of data collection in this study, allows the researcher to not only witness this dissolution within the observed organizational context, but also, to participate in it. Ethnography aids in investigating organizational processes in that it instills in the researcher a familiarity with an organization's practices and rituals—offering both necessary insight and contextual reference when consulting other sources of qualitative data. However, though the modern perspective on ethnography is stymied by a preference for description (VanMaanen, 1995) and attempts to isolate the observer's role in co-constructing the ethnographic experience (Neuman, 1994), the postmodern approach; described by Tyler (1986) emphasizes the role of dialogue in constructing the "cooperative story" that ethnography becomes. Rather than avoiding the author-authority question, researchers can embrace ethnography as the practice of narrating and emplotting the everyday interaction (Clegg, 1993). This notion of ethnography goes beyond the simple observation of the production of organizational narrative (as in Czarniawska, 1998); it eschews the false divide of observer-observed and embraces the role of the ethnographer in both co-constructing and analyzing the organizational narrative (Tyler, 1986). Then, from these narrations of everyday life, researchers gain insight into the living process of narrating experience in the context of organizing while simultaneously participating in their construction. This positions ethnography as an attempt to evoke meaning rather than impress it upon personal recollections of the researcher's individual experience (Goodall, 1990). These evocations become a key site for qualitative and critical analyses as social texts and narratives (Denzin,

1997; Linstead, 1993). And especially for an examination of megachurches, the nuances of attending and participating, singing and praying as part of a church with a postmodern approach to ethnography offers a glimpse into the nuances of church membership that can only be obviated through participation in and co-construction of that experience.

For this study, then, the researcher conducted a six-week ethnography at both Apex Church and Unity Church. During this time, while attending a variety of services, the researcher attended and participated in weekly church services for the six-week period, interacted with church members at services, viewed supplemental online material during the week, and explored the cafes and bookstores at both churches. Apex Church offers three weekly Sunday services and Unity offers two; so, during the time of the ethnography, the researcher attended each different service at least once to observe differences in the crowds and their reactions to specific messages. Though both churches offer assorted Saturday services, the researcher only attended Sunday services. During the ethnography, the researcher participated as a member of the congregation, singing songs, participating in prayers, and took notes during the central message or sermon portion of the service when the church provided a page for notes. Additionally, the researcher recorded church services using a dictaphone concealed in a shirt pocket or attached to the researcher's wrist.[3] To record notable events during the ethnography in the most unobtrusive manner, the researcher dictated short comments into the recorder during the service itself. After the service, the researcher stored the digital recordings from the service on a laptop and then, while listening to the recording, provided a written, more fleshed out account of the service and the ethnographic experience. Both the recordings and the written account of the researcher's

[3] This recording was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

experience became part of the data collection. In total, the researcher spent approximately 25 hours in the field over the course of six weeks and twelve services conducting the ethnography.

Interview Data

While ethnography offers a researcher a more nuanced look at organizing process through personal experience, it is through reference to and exploration of the narrated lived experience that researchers gain more than a glimpse into the organizational realities of members. In religious organizing especially, this personal experience of spiritual realities is particularly salient to exploring these organizational processes within the members' narrated accounts. So, for this study, individual recollections gathered through interviews represent emplotted sensemaking of the fragmented, "chaotic soup" of organizational experience (Boje, 2001, p. 1). Deetz (1992), following Derrida (1967/1997), argued that meaning is produced in continuous pluralities of simultaneous texts, and it is in that polysemy that discursive conflicts cement ideological monoliths. The fragmented stories and non-linear stories that emerge from interviews are representative of a collective story production and sensemaking process that researchers study under the umbrella of organizing. Thus, the interview data collected for this study is treated as a retrospectively emplotted account of lived experience.

Following ethnographic data collection, the researcher interviewed a total of 18 members of the megachurches. Of these, 11 were from Apex Church, five were from Unity Church, and two had held active membership at both churches. To qualify for participation in the study, members must actively consider themselves members of the churches and must have considered themselves members for at least six months. The semi-structured interviews were designed to facilitate the expression of members' honest experiences and narratives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Beginning with an initial set of nine questions, the interviewer used follow-up questions

to encourage participants to provide an open and honest account of their organizational experience without being constrained unduly by interview questions. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and, in total, produced approximately 125 pages of single-spaced data. Participants were sought out using a method of snowball sampling beginning with personal contacts. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 75 and had been members of the megachurches for at least six months to be eligible for the study.

Document Collection

Organizational documents are not simply formal communiques between members; they exist as a part of an intertextual web or network (Frow & Morris, 1993) of organizational narrative (Boje, 2001), and within megachurches these documents are of major importance—statements of belief, advertisements, and guides to further church membership are crucial to the megachurch 'experience'. As supplements to the ethnographic data, then, and as worthy sites of investigation in their own rights, during the ethnography, any church documents, promotional material, or literature that were made freely available were collected and archived in the data collection. This collection was not limited to literal paper documents, though, given the variety of promotional materials handed out at both churches. During the data collection, there were 25 documents and items collected from the churches (eight from Apex Church, 17 from Unity Church) including books, church magazines, contact cards, promotional coffee mugs, emails, and coupons for discounts and free drinks at church stores. In addition, the researcher collected online promotional material and information posted on church websites when specifically referenced by members in interviews or made salient in the ethnography. In the process of this collection, all documents were digitized and archived according to the date they were received.

Certain notes about the documents are also referenced in the ethnography to provide context for their receipt.

Data Analysis

Boje (2001) considers the nature of deconstruction as a postmodern epistemology rather than a formalized 'method' to be routinized in analysis, and offers seven analytical moves that researchers can employ to observe and understand this process of deconstruction within organizational texts. These include searching for duality; reinterpreting hierarchy; heeding rebellious voices; considering the 'other side' of the story; denying the plot; finding the exceptions; and tracing between the lines (Boje, 2001). From these seven moves, the researcher can then resituate the story within new balance and restory "to script new actions" (Boje, 2001, p. 21). This presentation of deconstruction analysis allows researchers to examine deconstruction in myriad texts, adapting and expanding the approach to varying organizational contexts while simultaneously laying the foundation for organizational change (Boje, Rosile, Dennehy, & Summers, 1997).

For the purposes of this analysis, considering the varied, intertextual data collected and the nature of the story deconstruction analysis, the data was stored within the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, all analysis and coding of data was performed manually within the software. Initially, following the collection, the researcher performed a full reading of the data. During this primary reading, the researcher made notes of general impressions and elements regarded in Boje's (2001) seven moves as they emerge in the text and appear as interrelated. From this reading, the researcher developed a coding schema that reflects evidences of self-deconstructing logocentrisms as they emerge from the data. During a second reading of the text, the researcher coded instances of emergent deconstruction according to the interrelations noted

during the first reading and the developed coding schema. As is representative of a deconstructive analysis, the data was not coded into thematic categories or by how the deconstruction emerges; rather, these codes linked analyzed text to the associated ideological center while also noting how the deconstruction emerges in the text. Finally, following the initial coding, a secondary coding schema was developed to trace the interrelations between evidences of deconstruction and centers of power. This secondary phase of coding was aimed at identifying the mutually supportive construction of the ideological centers identified in the first stage of coding while simultaneously setting the groundwork for restorying and resituating the organizational texts.

CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

This study examined identification processes within Christian megachurches through a Deconstruction analysis that simultaneously reveals conflict and instability in organizational realities and uncovers the power and the forces that attempt to unify and disguise that conflict. This analysis will answer three research questions:

RQ_1: How do members narrate their experiences of identifying with megachurches?

RQ_2: How does corporate colonization shape megachurch members' narrated experiences?

RQ_3: How does spectacle shape megachurch members' narrated experience?

The analysis presented in this chapter is the result of a story deconstruction (Boje, 2001) approach to understanding members' experiences collected through interviews, and through an examination of the researcher's own ethnographic experience at both Apex and Unity churches, and through an analysis of documents collected from both churches. The analysis will provide quotations from church documents, ethnographic notes, and members interviews. All quotations and any names contained therein have been assigned pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants. This chapter will incorporate the interwoven threads of the ethnographic experience, documents, and members' talk as collected in the interviews. Additionally, to the greatest extent possible, church materials and documents quoted in these results will be anonymized in order to prevent the identification of the churches and, thereby, preserve participants' privacy. This chapter will outline the results in two parts: first, it will detail emergent deconstruction in the organizational texts and, second, it will examine these "micro-powers in textual processes" as they (de)construct organizational realities (Boje, 2001, p. 20).

Emergent Deconstruction

Deconstruction emerges in texts not as an instant or as a moment; this ongoing phenomenon shapes how individuals read text, experience communication, and are brought to understand meaning. This process of deriving meaning from texts is laden with power, just as the process of bringing individuals to collective action and organizing is laden with power (Derrida, 1967/1997; Boje, 2001, 2008). Boje (2001), disregarding Derrida's aversion to a formalized deconstruction "method," articulated eight deconstruction analytic moves to guide story deconstruction analysis that researchers can employ to examine the instances of micro-power that emerge as deconstruction in organizational texts.

This section of results will focus on the explication of six evidences of micro-power as reflected in the emergent deconstruction of the data: welcoming, comforting, relating, teaching, engaging, and committing. Exploring quotations from member interviews, collected church documents, and ethnographic recollections, the following will indicate both the instability surrounding the following concepts in organizational experience and the powered dynamics that guide their interpretation by members. By employing seven of Boje's (2001) eight deconstruction moves[4] I seek to not only develop an understanding of *how* members describe and experience these powered dynamics but also how these individual recollections, in combination, indicate the antenarrative process of making sense of both the individual and collective place in the grander context of the megachurches under examination.

[4] I will reserve the eighth step, restorying, for the next chapter, which will examine the intertwined logocentrisms discussed later in this chapter as a foundation for restorying the megachurch.

Welcoming

When I first asked Bella to describe her experience at Unity Church, she described it as a judgment-free escape from the real world. She called it a "safe environment without somebody telling me to be quiet or don't talk about that [her faith]" Ariana described Apex church similarly:

> "I like the fact that there are people there from all different backgrounds. You know, all different religious denominations. Even religion…You had people that came from Catholic background, people that came from unchurched background. That people came from Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Pres[byterian]…all of them."

Whether describing the church as a vibrant representation of their home communities or as a diverse place for peoples of all faith backgrounds, all but one member interviewed for this study took time to emphasize the welcome that they felt at both Apex and Unity Churches. Dolores said it is just "like you were welcomed home. You were welcomed into somebody's house. Can we help you? Welcome." And in my time at these churches, I felt the same; both churches emphatically insisted on their blanket welcome to all at the beginning of services. For both churches, welcoming became a central tenant of their appeal to both visiting guests and old members. However, analyzing the deconstruction of that welcome, as I experienced it and as members and church documents described it, revealed antenarratives of obligation and conformity that inverts hierarchical norms of organizing.

Tracing the subtext. Members left much unsaid when describing the welcoming they felt at both megachurches; instead, they relied upon both my experience during the ethnography or common assumptions to fill in the gaps of understanding. Boje (2001) urged the researcher seeking to analyze the deconstruction of organizational meaning making processes to give voice

to that left unsaid by tracing between the lines of member talk and texts to give light to the unstated premises and hidden organizational history that lies at the heart of the experience. This deconstruction of *welcoming* members in to the megachurch will begin by tracing these subtexts as they indicate a conditional, temporary welcoming that obligates and indebts the member to the organization.

For the members of Apex and Unity Churches, the welcome that they felt came on numerous levels. Demographically, Peter described the diversity of the church as a key part of his decision to come to Apex church, stating "it's a pretty good mirror" of the location of the church itself. Contrasting it with some of the other churches that he had attended previously in the area, Peter articulated how the diversity of demographics also allowed another type of welcome—ideological: "They certainly don't only get speakers that believe one-hundred percent like they do." Both demographic and ideological diversity are hallmarks of the experience at both churches. Ginny described it, relating a slogan adorning the Apex Church's website, as "a church that loves people and that wants to spread the gospel of the nations. And it's a very welcoming church. I think they make a point of not making people feel condemned when they are there."

However, throughout all of these descriptions, members left a few things unstated. Katie described the feeling of welcome at Unity Church similarly but had trouble articulating the fundamental contradiction that lies at the heart of the megachurch's welcome:

> They are very accepting of everybody, that doesn't mean that they are… [pause] that, you know, they're gonna be…[pause] You know when people. They are accepting of all kinds of people, but we hope that as you accept Christ and as you become a Christian and

as you get into church your lifestyle changes if you don't have a lifestyle the way it should be or, you know what I mean.

Insofar as the church is an ideological entity in and of itself, attempting to move people to certain values and beliefs, the megachurch must balance its own willingness to welcome, revealing a contextual conditionality of the welcoming they have for members into the faith. In order to continue the process of spreading the gospel, the church must be willing to welcome those to whom they can preach, but that welcome is temporary and conditional upon the visitor's willingness to adopt the broader values of the organization through identification with the organization in a way that problematizes the individuals' identities. A Unity Church document provided to me on my first visit proclaims, "No matter where you are from or what you have experienced in the past...everything we do is about helping you discover your value in God's eyes." What is left unsaid is that it is only through Unity Church that you can discover your value, your purpose beyond your problematic origins.

For both Apex and Unity Churches, the concept of welcoming the stranger, the non-member is not just part of the sales pitch—it is part of the corporate ethos of the churches. Though the church can preach its openness towards individuals, forgiving all for their imperfections, the concept of welcoming in the megachurch antenarratively constructs an obligation for those who are welcomed into the fold. The constructed obligation through welcoming is one of the first evidence of the corporate transformation of identification processes in megachurches. Miranda described the wide breadth of the Apex Church's appeal and welcome by describing how "they take people who have been in church from the crib, and I can be sitting beside someone who just came that afternoon or that morning," but then she immediately frames

that welcome in terms of the power it has to convince those same individuals to think "wow, church. This is kind of a cool church. I might come back."

Though not explicitly stated, the welcome that members express for others and the welcome that visitors experience is designed to recruit, to entice, to evangelize to facilitate the growth of the church, and in doing so, communicates an obligation to reciprocate. Not only did Unity Church have a special welcome desk for their VIP first time guests, they had special parking spots that were closer than the ADA parking, and they offer guests twenty percent off their entire purchase at the Church bookstore and a free coffee from the in-house baristas. All of this comes in a convenient VIP emblazoned bag. Celeste, a Unity Church member, spoke of it as a process of "building in" to people, investing in them, and, in turn, creating a sense of indebtedness to the church. As Dolores described it, "I get the feeling of, Jesus knows he's accepted, if you're a Christian, Jesus has forgiven your sins, and he will still forgive your sins when you confess them. So, I'm anxious to get back in [ministry]." Just as the forgiveness of sins indebts the member to God, so, too, the churches' willingness to accept the imperfect visitor indebts them to the church.

Subverting the hierarchy. After the opening songs at Unity Church and before the beginning of the main sermon or message for the service, the worship leaders would take the time to specifically welcome their first-time guests or, as they label them at the beginning of the worship service, VIPs. The stories that the members of Apex and Unity Churches told about their experience with the welcoming atmosphere are often told from the perspective of the individual being brought in and welcomed, not from the individuals who are doing the welcoming. Hannah put this question into her own words: "Is this just a one-time thing where they welcome the guest or do I always feel welcome?" It is telling that she never answered that question and instead just

asserted that she has not "questioned her decision that [she is] a member at [Apex]." Further to the construction of an indebtedness between the visitor and the church, the megachurches' focus on newcomers places the member in an odd position: how to find one's position in a church focused primarily on the newly faithful. This section will deconstruct their stories by reinterpreting the hierarchy to examine the underlying value assumptions of both churches.

The emphasis on the visitor or the first-time guests was clear not only in the sermons, but also in the way that individuals discussed their own church experiences. Both Rita, who worked in a volunteer ministry capacity for Apex Church, and Nicholas, who serves on staff at Apex church, described their own experience in terms of the new member experience. When asked about her own experience at the church and the emotional toll that his ministry to troubled individuals takes on him, both spiritually and emotionally, she was quick to turn around the question; "I'm lame, but it's just an honor to do that and joining with the people and praying with them. Hearing their hearts, what they are dealing with. And that they want to come down and ask for prayer." Nicholas, similarly, emphasized that "We'll address that you do not need to be a member to get frickin' prayer of all things. If you need it, come up." Regardless of their position in the church, however, members continued to frame their own experience in terms of the multitude of people they were able to worship with and serve. Lavender, a former staffer for Unity Church, said that, after spending nearly her entire life at Unity Church, the service was still impactful "because in service, on one side of me you have a stay-at -home mom of three kids on the other side you have, like, a big, hot-shot lawyer, and in that moment we are on the same level."

But the tendency of members to frame and evaluate their own experience in terms of that of the new members revealed the place that new members have in both Apex and Unity

Churches. Rather than the new-comer attempting to carve out their own place in the churches, the membership existed to serve the visitor. In terms of the hierarchy, there is still a vast power differential between the leadership of the church and the total membership (to be discussed later in this chapter, in more depth), the primacy of the non-member or prospective member relative to the established member, whose purpose in the organization seems to be facilitation of the organization's growth, is an inversion of organizational norms. For the megachurch, the prioritization of the new member mirrors the prioritization of organizational growth over ministering to the established member. By framing their organizational experience in terms of their personal journey from guest to member or in terms of the new members who they have welcomed in to the megachurch, the church members participated in a narration of their own relegation. When asked her favorite thing about the Apex Church experience, Miranda immediately referred to it as one that is "well-rounded," one that invites people in or, as Oliver described it, "I don't think [Apex] expects people to conform." Rather than describing how the church ministers to them personally, they discuss the ability of the church to bring in new members.

The focus, in this sense, seems to be the evangelical goal of growing the church far and beyond the maintenance of members' spiritual health. Like a brand consumer, once the member was sold on the product and internalized the values of the organization, the organization had achieved the competitive goal of recruitment and growth. Thus, as the members framed their experience in terms of welcoming the new members, they are laying the communicative groundworks for their own disenfranchisement within the organization and their relegation to the position of spectator within the church.

Comforting

Lavender described Unity Church as not just a "very vibrant and colorful and very creative," she said that "[she] was really drawn to that [the church] because going to church felt like a really cool experience. It wasn't just like going to church." Understanding the church as a comforting or similarly pleasant emotional experience, members of Apex and Unity Churches described the lengths to which they felt the church would go to make them feel at home in their places of worship. However, in many ways, this seems at odds not only with the moral rigidity of religious institutions in general, but also with the desires expressed by some of the members. Susan, a member of Apex Church, described her need for a preacher, a leader to "poke me and get me back on the straight and narrow. To me, that's what church is all about." How then do church members negotiate their position in the church in relation to their own moral and spiritual needs relative to the comfort or enjoyment they get from the services? Further, descriptions of the comfort that individuals felt within both Apex and Unity Churches relied upon generalized good feelings and the uplifting nature of the services. As Susan iterated, later in the interview, "it's like a pep talk." This section will deconstruct these narratives of comfort and comfortableness to examine their role in the megachurches and as they reveal antenarratives' tacit complicity and a transformed role of the megachurch in members' spiritual lives.

Highlighting the exception. Despite the prevalence of talk to the contrary, members described moments that they felt uncomfortable at church in a variety of contexts. Some detailed how the size of the church or the pragmatics of the church (large video displays, crowds, etc.) affected their experience attending worship. Others illustrated how changes in the ministry or leadership created discomfort for them. These exceptions served as challenges to the dominant narratives of comfort in both Apex and Unity Churches; however, these instances of exception

also offered a clear insight into the role that the narratives have in the megachurch and how member discomfiture arises and is mollified in context of these comfort narratives.

In enumerating their own discomfort with the pragmatics of the church, the physical environment, and other aspects of the megachurch experience, members went immediately to the size of the church. Ariana said that, for an introvert like herself, it was easy to get overwhelmed in the sheer number of bodies that occupy the worship space at Apex Church and simply "from being by myself in a huge room of people that I didn't know." This was an understandable reaction. In my first venture to Apex church, I took note of how the physical presence of the building, the mulling crowds, and the enormity of the sanctuary space were simply overwhelming—a feeling that did not seem to abate over the course of the six weeks that I spent attending the church. In these instances, the discomfort members experience derives from a lack of connection or familiarity with both the surroundings and the individuals at the church. Members at Unity church confirmed similar experiences. Katie discussed how "there's no way you can know all the people at [Unity] church. There's just no way." In other words, not only is the size of the church a source of discomfort, its resolution is also an impossibility within the framework of the megachurch.

Other members recalled their own discomfort with other aspects of the megachurch experience, beyond the sheer size. For some, practical issues of distance caused problems. Igor noted that he and his fiancée (Dolores) drove nearly an hour to attend service at the main Apex campus, which caused issues with their ability to get "involved in small groups or mentoring or any of that…being that far away from the church," and while the church is opening a satellite campus in a location that is much closer to where they live, "we just don't know if that's something right now" that they want, mostly due to their discomfort with "the whole thing on the

screen." Joanne, who has been a member of the church "for about 30 years, " told me that she no longer attended services at Unity Church since they have stopped offering a specific worship time on Saturday that she attended, but she still considers herself a member at the church due to the amount of time that she spends working as a volunteer for the church and the occasional services that she will attend. Despite these major concerns for Igor, Dolores, and Joanne, they actively continued their relationship with the churches despite what they framed as minor inconveniences.

In the context of these exceptions to the narrative of exception, the description of discomfort was intertwined with the practical aspects of the church experience rather than the ideological or spiritual aspects of church membership. When discussing the aspects of their experiences at Apex and Unity Churches that they disliked or had caused them to consider leaving, members either denied any desire to leave or framed their concerns in terms of the practical elements of the church experience. Ernie, a former member of Unity Church and current member at Apex Church, specifically noted that he didn't mind the teachings at Unity Church, but simply felt uncomfortable with the way that the church "tried to park you in the right service spots, sit you in a certain spot. They were trying to control you more." Rather than evaluating the differences in the theological or spiritual commitments of the church experience, members prioritized the physical, practical elements of attendance. Nicholas put it best when discussing his family's experience when choosing to attend Apex Church for the first time.

> [I] didn't really pay much attention to the bullet point beliefs that a church would have. We would always go a nondenominational church. We never went to a Baptist or a Methodist or a this and that. We were just, if we could wear a T-shirt and jeans at this place, then were good to go. If we have to wear a suit, then maybe not. And so, if the

> beliefs that we were walking into were about the same then it's the typical youth pastor skinny Jean that type thing…As far as the doctrine of the church is concerned, it wasn't too much of a discrepancy between one church and another.

These member experiences detailed a primacy of the terrestrial over the spiritual realm in a subversion of the religious norm that prevents members from questioning the spiritual bottom line, especially when it comes to making the member feel comfortable at the church and willing to remain a member.

Denying the plot. Further, as the members described their own discomfort with certain aspects of the megachurch experience, they attempted to reframe their own feelings as a personal flaw for them to personally address *or* as minor aberrations outweighed by the overarching experience of the megachurch. For members, this reevaluation was hard to put into words; as Ariana described it: "It's where I belong. I can try to leave, but every time I gravitate back. It just is. It's hard to explain. You just kinda, you know that you know that you know [sic.] that's where you're supposed to be." This section will call this plot of discomfort allayed through communicative reframing into question in order to examine the (de)construction of the comfort narrative in the megachurches.

The comfort that individuals described, despite some of their qualms regarding the pragmatics of the church experience revealed an odd type of tacit complicity with what the members described as the factual realities of the megachurch experience. Members were quick to discuss how they simply admitted that things were going to be different from what they typically expected from a church. Oliver noted that "it was a little bit of a transition" to go from the small, community church that he was used to prior to attending Apex Church but justified it because "It's like attending a [large, local stadium] event. It's like, woah!...The dynamic of a Sunday

morning is *just* different." Susan discussed her experience with the music similarly and described how she had to come to terms with the fact that "the music is a little bit wilder." Of the music, Ernie said only "I like the old," but both of them said that despite the "different feel," it was simply a part of the reality of attending Apex Church. Ginny said that even though "it is still strange for [her] going to a church where you don't recognize everyone's faces…that's not something the church can necessarily change. It is a big church; that's what it is," and in many ways, this matches the experience that I had in my time at both megachurches. Despite the nervousness that I felt, especially on my first time attending the churches, I reminded myself that it was just going to be big, there were going to be a lot of people. Though my experiences are those of a visitor, for the member, the simple resignation to the factual reality of megachurchdom is an abdication of the power to create change in the organization or in their own circumstances.

Moreover, in many instances, the use of comfort as a descriptor for the church became a universal marker of vague, qualitative difference in experience that the members could not quite put into words. Susan discussed how, after leaving a sermon, "It makes you feel good. It makes you feel," when, earlier in the conversation she explicitly said that she didn't "want feel good ministry." Igor, who had attended Unity Church a few times before moving on to attend Apex Church discussed how he simply did not feel comfortable at Unity Church even though he could not clearly articulate a reason why. Peter discussed his journey coming to Apex Church looking for a place where he "really felt at home" and that offered "something more similar in terms of…doctrine" to a previous church in another country. He attended multiple churches where he had "a decent experience" but then settled on Apex Church because "There's just a comfort there. The comfort factor is pretty high." Overall, then, the comforting nature of both Apex and

Unity Churches became part of an ineffable logic behind the choice to stay where the individual felt most at home.

Even as individuals described their discomfort with certain aspects of their experiences at Apex and Unity Churches, they actively sought to reframe their own discomfiture in terms of their own reevaluation of what they expected from the church, and in the process, they draw themselves closer to the church. Especially as members attempted to reconcile with their expectations regarding size, they talked about reframing their expectations of what a church community can and should look like. Igor discussed how he felt comforted by the fact that he could get lost in the crowd. "Smaller churches," he said, "can sometimes be more intimidating than larger churches. Everyone sees you coming in. It's a little easier." Hannah, who described herself as a "hard copy person" told me that, though she was initially wary of a telecast sermon,

> Screen doesn't bother me. If he's not there, it doesn't bother me to have this telecast to me…you need to go see it because it doesn't even phase me and I really thought it was. And it does not at all. At all. And I was pretty, [pause] there should be a preacher there. Now I'm kind of like, it doesn't matter.

At Unity Church, Katie, who had been a member of Unity Church since its beginnings as a more traditional, Southern Baptist church, discussed how, even though many of the more contemporary evolutions of the church had given her pause, she much prefers the casual nature of the church as it prevents some of the awkwardness she has felt at other churches she has attended. In all of these stories, the members transformed their expectation of what it means to do church and, in doing so, reframed their own expectations along with the logic of the church, based in the notion of what feels good and what is comfortable.

Relating

In my Unity Church VIP goodie-bag, I received, among other things, a book written by the head pastor of the church that focused on the teachings of the church and their applications to the relationships that I, ostensibly, would build both within and without the church. The back cover proclaims, "You're only as great as your relationships. Show me your friends and I will show you your future." It further urges readers to surround themselves with the right "*they*" in accordance with the teachings of the book. Now, beyond the obvious Buberian stroke these comments would incite in some, these comments reveal some of the more interesting foci of the both Apex and Unity Churches: building relationships and transforming relationships in the image of the church; however, as members of these churches describe the process of relating and finding their place in the megachurch, these data suggest that these relationships and principles extend beyond the reach of the worship service and church activities and instead colonize the logic of relationship building outside of the churches.

Illuminating the subtext. Rita, a member of Apex Church, quickly articulated the feeling that most members shared with me about the relationships that they built through their megachurches: "It was all relational. Really, so many people end up there just out of relationships," and many of the members interviewed for this study said the same. Nicholas described the church as a family where the more he was able to get involved, the more he was "integrated into the DNA of what this church wanted to do." As the leader of a small group he described the miraculous nature of the connections that he has seen in that environment, but these narrators leave out part of the story. By illuminating the subtext in these narrations, this section seeks to examine the deconstructing role of relating in building and maintaining identity and spectacle in the megachurch.

In many ways, the members of Apex and Unity Churches describe the process of relating to others in the church as labor—either formal or informal. For Lavender and Celeste, the labor was formal. Both members of Unity Church described their time as employees in Unity Church's youth ministry and illustrated how that role allowed them to find their place in the church and relate to other individuals. Celeste described the joy of having "gotten to know and to serve with and to, like, grow alongside" the people of the church; Lavender, similarly, described how she was able to connect with "every kid that walked in the room" and with their families, during her time working in the day cares. For Nicholas, the labor of building those relationships was a little less formal. After describing the emphasis that Apex Church places on small group membership as a means of building community, he prefers to understand Apex as "a church of small groups, not so much the megachurch that has 20,000 people," Nicholas framed the importance of his small group leadership to me by stating the "there's not much family that can happen when you have 28,000 of them." As Ginny put it, "you don't necessarily feel like you are a part of the church unless you get involved," but that oddly places the onus of community building almost solely on the shoulders of the member. Essentially, the church will offer the framework through which individuals can craft connection, but the actual process of forging that community is an undertaking for the member, not for the church entire.

Rather than simply building relationships for the sake of the relationship itself, relating at Apex and Unity Churches is transformed as an extension of doing church. Nicholas noted that the way that he relates with the members of his small group is a way of avoiding "putting the whole faith thing in business hours." Church, he says, "doesn't have to happen inside a building that says [Apex] Church," and he specifically noted that his "interest is not in spreading the agenda of a…Bible study at my house. It is for community." The relationships that the members

develop because of the church, then, are reframed not as simple friendships but instead as extensions of the church process. Rita recounted the friendships that she has formed participating in ministry in terms of a mentor-mentee relationship where “it was great to see them grow personally with the lord.” Joanne offered a similar perspective on Unity church where she continued to work as a volunteer in order to maintain the relationships that she had there, even though she no longer attended weekend services at the church. For her, the volunteer work that she performed, the friendships that she had, were her version of doing church.

Regardless of the formality of the relational labor members must take upon themselves to forge connection in the context of the megachurches, members reveled the ways that church logic and justifications pervade the relationships that they form. Oliver, when describing his friendship with another couple that had mentored him in a shared ministry, said, “It’s not like we don’t make jokes…we do all of that, too, but much of the conversation is of a serious nature, because you can have chit chat with anybody, but these are special people.” Nicholas told me that he has “seen people who are just taking church casually, like any other thing, now be pastors. And they are in Bible school right now. And I got to see that happen.” Ginny described the relationships that she formed in her small group at Apex church as a means of “accountability with those people.” An advertisement for “connect groups” at Unity Church puts it more bluntly in describing small groups allow members to “gather regularly around common interests, life stages, or different activities, that build community and allow [Unity Church] to grow smaller as we grow larger!” Thus, as members perform labor in order to carve out their own space in the context of the organization, their labor is simultaneously laying the groundwork for the further growth of the church.

Narrating the other side. Though members described the connections and the relations that they had formed in small groups or ministry, other members described the challenges that they faced in forging those connections in the context of the megachurch environment. Those who crafted their place in the megachurch described the benefits of the community and the family that they found in the church and noted how it allowed them to feel at home in the vastness of the membership of their respective churches; however, for those members who had not undertaken that labor to find those relationships at the church, they found themselves oddly excluded from the narratives of the church.

In microcosm, church relationships in the megachurch echo the personal relationship that the member has with the community and the church as a whole. Miranda discussed how Apex Church leaders took the time to call and pray with a couple who was expecting twins “just a few days before her planned C-section…and a few weeks after their birth, sent an edible arrangement.” Oliver, discussing the same situation spoke of the wonders of an “enormous of thirty to forty thousand people and this young family has twins. And it is a stressful time. It’s a great time, but it’s a hard time. And this big enormous church has enough personal connection with that family to provide some support and encouragement. I think that’s pretty remarkable.” This is another fundamental contradiction: the personal megachurch. Members described the close, personal relationships they felt with pastors that they have never met. Igor described the head pastor at Apex Church as having a very “relational” style of preaching that allowed him to convey his message “to the masses” even though “you still feet that he connected with you”—regardless of whether or he was watching the sermon live or as a telecast at a satellite campus. This allows members to experience the close, personal relationship with the pastor that they describe, even without having ever interacted with the leadership.

However, if members cannot find these relationships, they are left disconnected, isolated from part of the church experience. When discussing how he encourages individuals to find their group in the church, Nicholas discussed his own experience trying to find his niche in the larger church:

> And so, the down side isn't that you are sticking with your friends, it's that when someone comes in for the first time and doesn't know anyone and everyone's with their everyone, they are sort of left in the corner. They are swimming in community, and they are not having any of the water splashed onto them. It stings and it stabs. And I know it because I was once that person before I really started getting involved in the young adults side of it….to see, you know, the group right here and you are like, that's what I want and that's not what I have. It's like you're hungry and there is turkey right in front of you, but you can't have any.

But Nicholas said that this loneliness only drove him further to try and find his place at the church and help others find that place. Members like Ariana and Hannah discussed they felt disconnected from the church because they were simply unable, because of time or distance or other obligations, to find connection in those small groups. They both discussed how that left them feeling "lonely" or distant from the community that they felt they should be doing more for. Even if those circumstances were beyond their control, they also could not help their own feelings of being guilty or neglectful of their own responsibilities to the church—even though they described themselves as active in attending services, tithing, and doing whatever else for the church they could.

Teaching

The sermon, the message, the teaching, lies at the heart of the worship services at both Apex and Unity Churches. Teachings, in effect, the central part of the worship service, are designed to teach, to educate, to help the members feel "equipped and encouraged and filled back up again," as described by Apex Church member, Fred. Both churches executed this very differently. At Apex Church, the worship service typically included the relatively standard, 25 to 45 minute presentation by a pastor or speaker from the church or a related organization; however, at Unity Church, the teaching took on a different form. Over my six weeks at the church, teachings took the form of traditional sermons, interactive dialogues, and a repurposed speech from a recent NRA conference delivered by the incoming president of the organization, Oliver North. Despite differences their differences in form, however, Oliver (a member from Apex Church) seemed to define it most effectively as a pastor reaching out to say, "let me tell you something about God that will make you feel closer to him. I mean, how could you be a person of faith and not want that or need that?"

Church members narrated their experiences at Apex and Unity Churches in terms of several dualities that center their understanding of the churches themselves. These dualities highlight power distinctions between what the church is and what it should be relative to other churches *and* the membership itself. The hierarchy articulated in these dualities not only highlight these performed power dynamics but also reveal the in-between space, the parts of the story that transcend the binaries and, thus, are left out. This section will detail how the concept of teaching is constructed and deconstructed in member talk as part of the self-sustaining logic of the church Discourse and how it silences and colonizes rebellious voices in the organization through multiple dualities.

The professional church. Professional versus unprofessional teaching emerged as a second duality in member talk. Peter was quick to point out that he appreciates the surfeit of quality speakers and the variety of messages: "There's a lot of uniqueness in the type of messages you hear and the type of people you go and see…and it helps me learn some stuff along the way." Oliver spoke of the quality of speaker relative to the community church of which he was a member prior to joining Apex Church. He described how professionalism is intrinsic to the megachurch as part of the breadth and depth of resources available to the organizations:

> he [the main pastor] works all week on a thirty-minute talk. I mean, that's what he does in the world….His job is to bring a message that feeds people life and hope and puts them in touch with God, and he takes that so seriously. For me, he is totally trustworthy…I've never in the years that we've been there, I've never heard him say something that caused my eyebrows to go up and go, yeah, I don't really think so. I don't think so. He is always accurate…when he preaches, when he gives a message, it's always good. I've never heard him where he was just kinda off this morning.

Many members repeated similar comments regarding the teaching, but they commented, generally about the messages and how "the word by [the head pastor] was so powerful. And it really is the light of God" instead offering insight into the actual messages themselves. Even for a self-described note taker like Hannah, "I take these copious notes through the service," who spoke extensively about the quality of the teaching at the church and told me that she gets to church an hour early to reserve her favorite seat and review her notes, could not tell me her favorite sermon or teaching that she had heard recently. Thus, as the members frame their understanding of church teachings in terms of the professionalism it exemplifies, they begin to distance their own evaluation from its content and, instead, focus on its production.

Understanding the teaching that exists within a megachurch as professional or unprofessional, especially in the context of the resources available for the church has two implications for the ways that members make sense of other religious organizations and their position in the church itself. First, members conflated the wealth of resources and the quality of the production of the church with the veracity of, or their agreement with, the theological message being presented. When discussing the qualities of the church, Fred noted that the reason he appreciated the teaching was not based in his agreement with the message but rather in the fact that the church has the resources to create an "implementation of the vision." For many, the messages themselves did not even enter in to their evaluation of the church. Nicholas said that what he was looking for "something that we could go in, be like yeah, not being put to sleep. [That's] not like oratorical Benadryl." As members describe their evaluation of the church and its teachings based in the performance of that teaching, they reframed their own expectations of church. Even as members, such as Susan, described the need for a preacher to reinforce their moral rectitude and noted that she left Unity church for being too much of a "production" and "gimmicky," she described how after leaving a service at Apex, her favorite thing was that "you just feel good." This emphasis on performance, then, undermines the validity with which members view other, smaller churches with fewer resources and discouraged critical thought and reflection on the teachings of the church.

Further, professional versus unprofessional ministry reframed the members' relation with the church as members distance themselves from what they describe as a monolithic authority in the church. In a sense, this duality reveals a sense that the church members simply leave it to the professionals.

The biblical church. Ginny, in describing the typical sermon, discussed how much she appreciated the fact that Apex Church welcomes "and invites pastors from all sorts of churches, from Baptist churches, and catholic churches, and all sorts of various denominations" to come and teach the congregation, and despite their various experiences and theologies, she told me that "their focus is on, on the truth and biblical standards." But what biblical standards? When discussing teaching at Apex and Unity Churches, in addition to referring to the professionality with which the pastors presented their messages, members noted the biblical basis for the teachings. Throughout member discussion of the teaching at Apex and Unity Churches, there was vast differences in the ways that members described what typifies a biblical teaching; however, they all agreed that the churches that they attend offered authentic, biblical messages. They went further and characterized the biblical basis of their churches' teachings in opposition to the inauthentic, unbiblical teachings of the churches that embrace the "extreme and charismatic" view, as Ginny described it. Nicholas put it bluntly in describing church teachings as "biblical teaching based on what we believe." This second duality, that of biblical versus emotional teaching disenfranchises member dissent, undermines members who have questions regarding teaching, and cements the foundational logic of the church.

During the last service that I attended at Unity church, the pastor urged members to rely on biblical messages and standards while decrying emotionality. He told the congregation that "feelings can get freaky and funky" and urged them to rely on biblical principles to guide their faith and their actions, and though this treatment of emotions comes in a slightly different context, it echoes the sentiment that many members shared with me. Members discussed with me either the negative experience they had with charismatic churches or the negative impressions they had of churches that, in their mind, rely upon emotion rather than what they called biblical

teaching. Fred noted that as the lead pastor at Apex Church “teaches on the holy spirit and is very bold about that, it is very scripturally based, not an emotional type of thing.” However, the ways that many individuals described the “biblical” nature of the teaching and, thereby, the authority of the message tended to confuse the root of what made the messages biblical. Fred, noted it as “the teaching of the word by [the head pastor of Apex Church].” Katie told me that at Unity Church, “they preach the word, they use the scriptures.” Dolores told me that, at Apex Church, “it’s just facts. They point out the facts in the Bible and take you to the different places where it is relevant. And…they break it down. Here’s what we are really saying here.” As members discussed the nature of the biblical message offered at both Apex and Unity Churches, they talk about the use of the Bible as an evidentiary base for the claims of the ministers. In other words, as the members have construed it, it is the pastoral authority that, through interpretation, reveals and gives voice to their own truth, supported by Biblical verbiage. While at a Unity Church worship service, I noted that the pastor had paperclipped his printed notes over the text of both pages, literally covering the biblical text with his own words. What I thought then was an odd presentation choice, in this context, represents a fitting metaphor for the way that church members describe their understanding of biblical teaching.

Further, by constructing the notion of a “biblical” teaching in opposition to emotionality, members attempt to characterize the teachings of their church as rational and *True*. Fred discussed how he appreciated the scriptural basis and the sincerity of the worship at Apex Church especially in comparison to the “charismatic trappings” of other churches. Here, the duality of biblical and non-biblical teaching allowed members to discount what they considered to be the more emotional or charismatic figures of other churches, while simultaneously justifying their own pathetic appeals. Hannah described the emotional, charismatic aspects of

Apex Church as a plus, because of the biblical basis of the teaching and the contrast to her upbringings in the Church of Christ. She described attendance at Apex Church as "setting something free … We are, you know, it's just a good feeling to feel like you are. It is okay to praise and worship openly. And sometimes you cry and that's okay." This display of emotionality, however, is only justifiable because the church only elicits those emotions through the teaching of biblical truth, not as the sole means of presenting the word, and it is through that biblical truth that the "message just speaks to you."

Finally, framing of the biblical truth behind church leaders' interpretations of religious texts, however, disenfranchised and colonized those individuals who had questions about the churches' decisions. Overall, most members were unwilling or unable to describe an instance of disagreement with any of the pastors or the teachings at either Unity or Apex Churches, but even when they did, they often sought to reframe their own consternation into a personal flaw. Susan[5], who had described Unity Church services as "gimmicky," later went on to tell me that she was still supportive of the church. "You know what, I will never, ever, ever, knock [Unity] Church because people will come to know the lord through a church like that. It is not for me, but it is not for me to say that it is not for you." Here, even though Susan had previously told me all of the flaws that she felt were present at Unity Church, in the end, she attributed those flaws of the church to her own misaligned expectations for what the church should be. However, because of the biblical nature of the teaching—the fact that the members are still engaged in church—the dissatisfaction that she personally felt was of little consequence. Here, Susan's own feelings and discomforts were less important than was the "biblical" nature of the church's teachings.

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[5]Susan was recruited for this study as a member of Apex Church, but she also spent an amount of time at Unity Church that would qualify her for participation in the study.

Similarly, Peter described his own disagreement with some of the ministry at Apex Church saying that I “could interview [him] after every Sunday” to discuss the number of things that he “maybe [doesn’t] understand or [doesn’t] agree with, but I wouldn’t leave because of that.” In this quotation, Peter corroborated the fact that the teaching is not primary to the megachurch experience, insofar as he would not leave because of a disagreement over doctrinal matters. He also showed how the concept of “biblical teaching” colonizes the individual members’ voices. It is telling that Peter described his moments of disagreement as instances where the church “might be able to educate [him] on that” despite his own “pretty strong opinions.” In this context, Peter did not describe a fruitful conversation on theological disagreement, he is articulating his own need for re-education to tow the church line.

Engaging

Lavender described the experience of attending worship at Unity church in terms of an almost magical, ethereal light. She said it was able to “pull you from whatever is going on in that moment and help you focus on what is important.” Fred called it as a “sense of being drawn into the lord. Just this sense of, this is truly worship. It’s about worshipping God. It’s truly from the heart of the worshippers that are on the platform.” For the members of both Apex and Unity Churches, engaging in the worship services and feeling at one with the congregation through a celebration of God was one of the most important aspects of their membership in the respective churches. Engagement, for them, was part of the authentic worship service that manifested the power of the divine. As Ginny put it, “It’s really powerful being in the presence of so many other believers who are all there to worship God … I find that very spiritually moving. And very humbling at the same time.” In this context, humbling seems an appropriate adjective; during the worship services I noted how I felt minimized in such a large crowd of worshippers. It felt

isolating and simultaneously unifying. Other members' narrated experiences revealed similar feelings and highlighted how engaging in worship at a megachurch simultaneously foregrounds the universal connection of the church while creating a sense of isolation. This section will examine this dialectical recombination of autonomy and connection that lies at the heart of engaging in megachurch worship and examine its relation to the spectacular nature of the megachurch.

Subverting the plot. The forces of isolation and connection in members' discussion of engaging in worship did not emerge as an oppositional or hierarchical duality; they instead, emerge as part of a script that emplots members' experience in the worship service. In short, member engagement is presented as a process that relates to the double entendre of engaging worship. For members, engaging simultaneously describes the qualities of the worship—it is engaging, exciting—and their experience of that worship—engaging in worship, connecting with worship. This emplotted notion of engaging (in) worship, then, details how members were drawn into and enraptured with church teachings and gives insight into how that process of engaging relates to the feelings of isolation and connection that members described.

Members narrated their experience of engaging with the church as a process connecting to the church community through individual isolation. When Igor told me the story of his decision to start attending Apex Church, he said that he was looking for a place to heal; specifically, he noted that it was easier for him to find that place in a large church, like Apex Church, because he could "get lost in the crowd there and take what [he] needed" to find himself. For Ariana, an introvert and a single woman, the prospect of church as "sitting there by yourself. It kind of makes you feel, you know, lonely," but when the worship starts she told me that "half the time I don't even realize there are people standing around me. I completely disengage from

everything around me. And just focus." For Ariana, as for many of the other members of both Apex and Unity Churches, engaging in worship allowed her to move from the experience of isolation surrounded by thousands of strangers to connection through the body of the church. She described the experience and the way that "it can affect you spiritually. And it's like, to have it there and be able to be participating in singing …and you know that you can have that personal time. It's just, I don't know. It's good for regeneration." For these members, then, the connection that they found to the congregation, through their own isolation or personal time, became their means of achieving divine connection.

These two accounts offered descriptions of the emplotted concept of engaging, but they also demonstrated how that notion of engagement centered around the community of the church itself. These narratives of engagement center around the primacy of the church in members lives as they made sense of their own moral choices. At Apex Church, one teaching focused on the concept of community in the church and was specifically titled "Isolation." During the teaching, the minister warned church members against relying too much on their own judgement and their own moral wisdom. Instead, he urged the congregation to seek community through the church in order to attain divine wisdom because "God is not enough." Here, the leadership of the church positions engagement with the church not only as a mediator for divine connection, they characterize it as a need in and of itself for its position as a facilitator of community. More to the point, megachurches offer a different kind of community by virtue of their size. Peter described this community building as a fundamental part of being a church; he noted that "the first church was a megachurch. The church in Acts is 3,000 people at it one day. That's a megachurch." By emphasizing the importance of community connections, the church moves the individual from

the isolated member in a crowd of thousands to active participant in manifesting the community that everyone needs in addition to God.

Finding the exception. For the members who attended the main campuses of their respective churches or were, as Peter described it, "close to the source," it is easy to cultivate a sense of community, but what about those members who are on the more literal periphery of the megachurches? Especially in the context of megachurches that span across cities and states, though there are far more members who attended the satellite campuses or viewed the online messages, they existed at the margins of the lived story. So, too, the staff and other individuals who helped to make the services at both Apex and Unity Churches run smoothly were exceptions to that grand narrative of community engagement. And given the emphasis that both churches placed on connection and the formation of community as a means of connecting with the divine, members' stories from the periphery are revealing insofar as they challenged the dominance of the emplotted concept of engagement represented in most members' talk.

For some members, the experience of attending a satellite campus of the churches prevented them from engaging in the church community. Peter said that even though "it was really the same experience," he did not feel that he was at the "source." Igor, who drove over an hour round-trip to attend worship at the main campus of Apex Church told me that, given his own experiences at the satellite campuses "I don't think it would do it for me." However, members were quick to point out that this lack of connection was not due to lack of a live sermon. Igor noted that the live music that is present at all satellite campuses helps, but there is another qualitative aspect of the experience of attending the main campus that those other campuses simply cannot fulfil. Celeste noted that while "it's really nice to see everybody there that are worshipping God and to really have that experience" at the main campus of Unity

Church, "you can't have that same experience through worship" at a satellite campus, but she stays because "sometimes you go into [the main campus location] and you only know two people, but if I was at my own campus, I could sit next to anybody and I would just know them." Lavender agreed that when she "moved to a smaller campus, it got less tiring because … it was obviously less people so the stress was a lot less."

For a few other members of both Apex and Unity Churches, their inability to engage in the worship was derived from the positions that they held in the church. Nicholas, who works in the lighting department at Apex church, described how he cannot sit through a service many times because he became distracted by the lights and perceived imperfections in the service. He described how this takes a toll on him and on the other individuals who work in his position:

> It's very hard for me to attend a service and shake off the fact that the lighting is something that I'm responsible for … me being me, I've been cursed. I'm in the midst of worship or the sermon and I'm, like, looking around every now and then thinking, is this color right? It just doesn't feel good at all.

But the toll is not unique for him. Celeste described a similar set of circumstances for her former boss at Unity Church who was unable to attend worship with his family, causing great frustration and tension for him. However, in describing these instances of frustration and hurt, members never turned against the church. Instead, they reframed their experiences as engagement of a different sort. Lavender noted how both her paid position and her volunteer positions offered her the sense of community, but when there were shifts in that experience it was hard for her: "I struggled with it for a while." However, she reaffirmed that she is a "believer that being a part of [her position] was the most important thing [she] ever did at [Unity] church." Similarly, Nicholas described how his position, though it prevents him from engaging in worship, allows him to

build a different kind of community and that the staff are actively seeking opportunities to give their paid technicians time to go where “you’re still on the clock. You’re still gonna get paid and were not going to bother you.” So that those members can get their spiritual fix, their engagement, too—even if it comes from a different kind of community and connection.

In both of these exceptions, the exception was not only that the members described their inability to connect to worship in the same way of being drawn into the worship that other members described, but also, they noted that they were able to get a sense of community through the relationships they developed with the other members who attended the church. In this sense, they add depth to the descriptions of other members regarding how the concept of isolation is key to the feeling of engaging wholly in the worship. Similarly, Nicholas noted that “the service, by its very nature, does not give you the door to open up” and engage with others to explore spiritual truths. Just as Igor described his need to feel lost in the crowd, Dolores noted that her experience coming to Apex Church came right after an incident at a former megachurch she attended left her feeling conspicuous even amidst the crowd, but for her, the feeling of being isolated let her become part of the congregation, “you get to feel the holy spirit moving … you all [become] connected to worshipping the Lord. And it’s not about your own little thing or this little group.” In the megachurch, members described the process of losing themselves as finding God.

Committing

The first sermon that I heard from the senior pastor at Unity Church was also the last service that I attended in person for the ethnographic portion of this study. The service was part of a Fourth of July celebration that had lasted the entire weekend, and it culminated with a teaching on commitment and freedom. The pastor began by describing the interrelation of

national identity with church identity. He said that citizens of the United States of America are people “who pledge themselves to a position no matter the cost.” He then went on to push for the people in the audience to make declarations of faith, to commit themselves to the Lord, but he didn’t tell them how. In filling in the gaps, the church members that I interviewed for this study revealed a conflicted concept of what it meant to commit to the church. Many members discussed the manifestation of their commitment in terms of volunteer work and ministry and outreach. Others described how they felt uncommitted to the church because they were not involved outside of the service. This section will seek to reframe this deconstructing concept of committing in the megachurch as it transmogrifies the relationship between church and member into one characterized by consumption and exploitation.

Tracing between the lines. As a volunteer at Unity Church and, later, as a paid staff member, Celeste told me that she was taught to live by the motto “‘something, everything, or nothing’ and it kind of means, like, you are just there to volunteer. Sometimes you have something to do. Sometimes you have nothing to do. Sometimes you are doing everything.” And this quotation serves as a poignant summation of the experiences members narrated. In some cases, the volunteer or paid work that members of these megachurches did was simply overwhelming physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As Dolores explained:

> I had to do this and I was being a good member of the church, but then, and it gets really hard. Because it’s been so long, and you know you get to this point where you don’t even want to go to service anymore because you are so focused on, I have to make sure that this service is good and that everybody is safe with their kids.

These stories revealed a subtext of church exploitation of members that is communicatively justified through the deconstructing notion of committing and being committed to the church.

Here, I follow that subtext to trace the communicative justification of that exploitation in the minds of members.

Even though he consistently participated in tithing and attended services at Apex Church regularly, Ernie was quick to tell me that "we're not active," and this was a common self-admission for those members who told me that they do not participate in the myriad ministries and outreach programs at both Apex and Unity. Ariana felt similarly; when comparing her membership to a previous church that she had attended, Ariana told me that she is "not active right now" because she simply attended church and had recently begun tithing at Apex Church. These descriptions, then, provide a clear negative image of the committed member: volunteer labor on top of financial contribution to the church. Dolores told me, when describing her position at Unity Church that, "being a member means being invested and you're committed and you're part of a team." For her, that team was represented by the volunteers that she managed as part of her work for the church *and* her grander obligation to the church. For these members, the fulfillment of their obligations to the church represented their commitment to the entire body of Christ. Susan told me that the obligation she felt to the church was not because it would "make God love [her] one bit more, but [she] personally just [felt] like [she] should honor Him." In this way, the obligations that the members constructed for them was not simply a means of showing their commitment to the church—it was a way of proving their commitment to God.

But fulfilling this commitment was not a simple task for many members. Katie discussed with me the challenges of her involvement with the prison ministry, and Lavender told me about the heartache she experienced after spending years in the children's ministry at Unity Church. After watching the church move in a different direction than she was comfortable with, she felt her commitment to the church challenged. "It was hard because, I mean, I was so invested in a

ministry and to see all of those changes happen over very short period of time was really hard for me." Oliver described his position in ministry at Apex Church as "spiritual warfare" to indicate the intensity of the work that he is did for the church. He described how "it takes a toll. It takes a lot of time. It's a big time commitment. [I] don't have much of a weekend … so it takes a toll." When describing the physical toll, he said:

> You are with people who are upset. People who are angry. Maybe resentful. There's tears and there's heartache and there's hopes dashed. And that's what you deal with for three or four hours. So, the toll that it takes. When we come home on Sunday afternoons, we're whomped.

For Oliver, as with most of the other members, the toll that the church extracted from them is entirely volunteer; much of this work was done from the goodness of the members' own hearts and was part of an obligation that they feel for the church. Celeste, setting aside her humility for a moment remarked that, upon reflection she felt "like [she] was really selfless" given the amount of work that she did for the church as both a volunteer and as a paid employee.

In spite of the stress, frustration, and pain that many members described, Oliver ensured me before concluding our interview that for the members of the team he participates in "we get more back than we give" because of the change that he witnessed in those he was able to help over the course of the ministry who have stayed in the church and grown to be productive church members. In this sense, Oliver and the other members of Apex and Unity Churches reframed the cost of their involvement in the ministries and labor for the church into justified personal costs for the benefit of the whole congregation. This process of reframing emerged in different ways. For some, like Celeste, there was a great deal of hardship and expenditure on their parts on behalf of the church they were able to make sense of it because she "felt really helpful" because

her service "was for the greater good of the ministry." Fred offered the same explanation for his time with Apex Church. He told me that, beyond the times that he will minister to people on most Sundays, he "made a commitment to be available for counseling" beyond the normal hours of the ministry. Nicholas, on the other hand, like other members took the extra cognitive step of reframing his commitment to the church such that there is no cost to him "because it started as my choice, I want to do this. And I was hired into something that was my choice. It doesn't feel like I'm flipping burgers at McDonald's. It doesn't feel like a job." In all of these situations, though, the members revealed their own complacency with the toll that the work they do for the churches takes on them. They normalized the cost to themselves and justified it for the good of the church and, thereby, for their commitment to the Lord.

Finding the other side. This inculcation of members' obligations to labor for the church that emerged in the members' experiences in Apex and Unity Churches had a simultaneous effect on the way that members understood the role of the church in their lives and on their own commitment to it. Rather than a mutually supportive relationship between membership and church, members described insidious tensions resulting from the drive to commit to the church. In this vein, as members discussed their relationships with the churches, they centered their descriptions around the church and its justifications. Here, I will examine further deconstruction in members' understanding of commitment and recenter members' stories on their own agency and their own sacrifices for the church.

Tithing was primary among the sacrifices that members described making for the church, regardless of their volunteer status, and members had very strongly held beliefs about the tithing process that clearly mimicked those of the church. Katie described how, for her tithing is a repayment for the grace of God in a very literal sense: "We just feel, like, that by paying our tithe

we just feel, like, that the Lord takes care of us, for sure.” Here, members described an inverted tithing process whereby the payment of a tithe ensures God’s blessing. Put another way, the tithe to the church was the means of committing to God so that he protects the member. This description mimics Dolores’ description of the importance of tithing as an act of obedience, again, in repayment for God’s blessing “I would not have what I’ve got if God did not bless me with it … and I know that provision was from God to provide for this” Within these megachurches, then, the concept of the tithe becomes akin to that of a theological credit card where members make repayment for the blessings that have been bestowed upon them in order to maintain divine favor. As Ariana put it, “There are certain protections and certain promises that God gives whenever you are faithful.” Igor described it more bluntly: “not tithing is robbing God and we definitely don’t want to do that.” Igor’s description of robbery of the divine by not tithing is an exact quotation from a sermon presented at Apex Church wherein the head pastor of Apex Church declaims prosperity ministry that overtly preys upon vulnerable members looking for hope.

These obligations to tithe and to labor for the church had an impact on how members conceived of their membership in the church. For the most part, members were blasé in their description of their membership with the church. Nicholas joked that “it’s not like the AAdvantage program with American Airlines where you get to stock up miles,” instead “it just means that I get emails every now and again.” Peter, who had been unable to attend church in person for several weeks but is continuing to watch the sermons online said that he mostly does so “for keeping up to date and for interest’s sake.” However, the mundanity with which members described their position in the church is key to their abstraction of the church from their commitments to God. Just as members described their reasons for and experiences with the

tithing process, members discussed their commitments to the church as simply a part of committing to God. In doing this, members abstracted away the role of the church in connecting the member to the divine as a part of the mundanity of membership in the megachurch. As Ariana reminded me, “God is bigger than any of our circumstances … God is more powerful than anything that goes on down here.” In this quotation regarding her commitment to the church, Ariana, abstracted away the position of the church as mediator to the divine; in members descriptions of committing to the church, they abstracted away the position of the church and discussed how their commitments, their labor, their financial contributions, were directly for God. But this discursive abstraction of committing to church/God transmogrified members understanding of the church such that the church itself *was* the God to which they were describing their commitments.

Logocentrism

If deconstruction is, as Boje (2001) presented it, to serve as a postmodern epistemology that allows researchers to examine antenarrative in action, the understanding of the antenarrative comes through its connection with the notion of logocentrism. Though Boje did not include the presentation of logocentrisms as part of his deconstruction analysis, the exploration of fractured logics as they emerge in talk is part of developing a full understanding of how antenarratives shapes members’ narrated experience. Antenarrative shaped members’ organizational sensemaking processes through a fragmented process characterized by power, just as the logocentrism centers and guides the interpretation of unstable language (Derrida, 1967/1997). The examination of deconstruction as antenarrative in the previous section, then, lays the groundwork for this section to provide an interrogation of the logics at work in members’ talk regarding megachurches. In this section, I will examine these logics that emerged from the

deconstruction examined above, especially as the function to shape members' experiences in the megachurch. Thus, the remainder of the chapter will proceed with an examination of the three emergent, fragmented logics that shaped members' experiences and narration of megachurches.

Logic of Personalization

After I walked out of my first service at Apex Church, I noticed a stand that I had walked past as I entered the service. It held over fifty different kinds of brochures for prospective members. It had information for everyone from young children to elderly widows. These pamphlets contained information on how Apex Church wanted to reach out to any kind of prospective member. And this is only one of the manifestations of the logic of personalization that undergirded my experience and members' narrations of their time at both Apex and Unity Churches. Members described to me, in detail, how they felt that every aspect of the church was tailored to their needs. Kelly described it in this manner:

> I love the church. I feel like the pastor was preaching to me, things that I needed to hear and wanted to hear and spoke to me. You know I would like for everyone to go to church there to feel like I felt from the experience.

Thus, for members the process of identifying with the megachurch seems to be a simultaneous, spectacular process of concentration and diffusion.

Members told me that they felt as though their experiences at both Apex and Unity Churches were specifically curated for them in a way that was both overwhelming and miraculous. When discussing what she considered her favorite moment that she has experienced at Apex Church, Susan told me of a morning that she was going to go and receive prayer from the ministers following worship, something that she had never done before, but "before the service ever started [she] had two different pastors on staff come by, stop where [she was], and

tell [her] that they had been led to come pray with us." Simply, she said for her "that was so God." Similarly, Ariana described how personal some of the sermons felt for her:

> I believe it's God. It's God inspired. Because God can use whatever he's teaching … to preach in every individual person. Because he knows where we are at individually. He knows each of our names. He knows the number of hairs on our heads. He knows us that well. So, it's like he can help to know us in what we need to hear on that particular day from that particular message and we'll hear exactly what we came to hear. It happens so much.

The logic of personalization transformed the ways that members experienced the church by crafting the experience into a spectacle whereby the concentrating nature of the message allowed members to see whatever they desired. During the ethnography, this notion was reinforced through services on prophecy that were presented on the same day at both churches. At both services, church members were encouraged to open themselves to the power of prophecy and let the church predict and speak power into their futures. During one of these services, the pastor told a story of reading his son's mind through inspiration from God—a feeling that members of both churches described as part of the personal connection that they experienced in worship. Oliver discussed the evolution of a Help department[6] at Apex Church:

> There's a lot of counseling. A lot of, just, emotional and spiritual support for somebody. There is a [Help] department. And the [Help] department. They are pastors and they are volunteers are trained to provide care. What does that mean? Anything it needs to mean. It can be … anything we can do to help. We'd be happy to provide support.

[6] Again, the actual name of the ministry is given a pseudonym here to ensure the privacy of the members involved in the study.

This feeling of the personal church being "whatever it needs to be," that seems to be in fundamental contradiction with the size of the churches, then emerges from the plurivocality manufactured in the church to draw all people in and show them the possibilities of membership in the church.

However, the church also relied upon adaptation to the needs of the members in a spectacle of diffusion (Debord, 1967/1995). Fred described the multifaceted outreach practices that Apex Church uses to reach any member of any population. "[Apex] has the resources to help *them.* Whatever they are dealing with, whatever counsel they need, whatever they need, [Apex] has the resources to help them. So that is a good thing." Contra the unifying nature of some aspects of the megachurch experience, the size of the megachurch facilitated the church's ability to provide outreach to all kinds of populations, in conventional ways—both churches advertised summer camps for children of all ages—and in less normative ways—including a monthly Sabbath service with readings from the Torah and hymns in Hebrew to fulfill the mission of, as the church articulated on their central webpage, "tak[ing] the Gospel to the Jew first." Bella noted how Unity Church incorporated several different themes in worship services relating to black history month and boxing and movies that she found not only instructive but also helped to show how the church can use any situation "to heal people." Members also noted how the formation of small groups such as one that Miranda described for divorced women, allowed them to feel connected with and a part of the church because of its size and wealth of resources and not despite it.

Thus, to answer the first research questions, how do members narrate their experiences of identifying with megachurches, the individuals represented in this study presented their experiences of identifying with the values of the church as a process of concentrated spectacle

whereby members simultaneously experienced individual outreach through the large populations available in the church and a unified, central message in worship. Through a logic of personalization that manifests as both a unified spectacular force that functioned to manufacture a sense of personal relationship in the context of the massive congregation and as a fractured force that appealed to as many populations as possible, both Apex and Unity Churches curated experiences for their members that were based in and capitalized on members' individuality.

Logic of Colonization

In giving me his summation of why it is important that Apex Church is a megachurch, Peter told me that:

> Anything that can't grow stagnates. And so, in my opinion, if the premise is right that, you know, we should be attending church and the Bible is inspired, we should be living according to God's law, then churches should be big because they should grow.

But the experiences that members narrated represent more than a church that is rooted in expansion. Rather, they described a church that, through strategic plurivocality, was attempting to reach as many people as possible for the purpose of sustaining the church and spreading the gospel into as many aspects of individuals' lives as possible. From financial teachings to explain how individuals in the church should be spending money to political sermons that encouraged members to vote, the overarching logics of both Apex and Unity Churches incorporated a sense of incursion that served to colonize aspects of members' lives in order to remake them in the image of the church and encourage the growth of the organization as a whole.

Fundamentally, the ethos of the megachurches examined in this study were actively justified in terms of their own size and their potential for growth. Bella articulated what she perceived as the goal of Unity Church by discussing how the church attempts to reach the many,

"God said he reached the, what? Many. He didn't reach all the rich. I'll reach the, no! God said I'll reach everybody." In order to achieve that evangelism, Oliver described Apex Church as "a culture of excellence" that "translates into everything" that the church did to curate the perfect experience for their members. The focus on growth also justified the inversion of the hierarchy, as described above, and the primacy of the first-time guest at both churches as a means of both attracting and maintaining new members and incorporated a corporate ethos into the justification of the church. In a market sense, the more people consume a product, the better it is assumed to be; the justification of the church, the veracity of its teaching, the power of its pastors, and the experience of the worship in the number of members is of a consanguineous logic that was even present on the back of the book and the advertising materials handed to me in my VIP goodie bag. It is a logic that said because the church is large, because thousands of members attend, and because we can continue to grow, we have the right message. And for many of the members I interviewed, that was a powerful force. As Oliver, as quoted previously, asked me "How could you be a person of faith and not want that or need that?"

Further, the notion of growth metastasized from simply a means of justifying the church and its future, it became a metaphor for individuals' transformation in the context of the church. For members, the concept of growth in the church had two meanings. Primarily, it referred to the evangelical process of growing the church and spreading the gospel; however, there was a similar, if not as overt, focus on the ways that church membership can change the member. My second week of attendance at Unity Church focused on these kinds of transformations. Not only did the opening slate of songs include the debut of a new song with an up-tempo rap feel that emphasized how "all of a sudden / we keep movin' forward / all of a sudden / the church say amen, " but they also featured a message that emphasized to members how to manage their

finances in accordance with biblical principles with God as your personal financial advisor to solve problems in ways that "no financial advisor at Merrill Lynch can help you with." For that purpose, Apex Church partnered with a local radio host and businessperson to offer a University course that will teach its members similar principles. For the members of both Apex and Unity Churches, this is what they referred to as the personal growth that they see in themselves after attending churches that emerged as a reshaping of individual identity in the image of the church itself, as a colonizing, incursive force in the individual members' lives.

Research question two asked: How does corporate colonization shape megachurch members' narrated experiences? In answer, the data suggest that the incorporation of the corporate ethos into the church shaped members' narrated experience in two clear ways. First, it colonized the logic of the church and its attitudes toward growth. In this sense, as the church justified its existence on the basis of growth and for the purpose of growth, the church, following the corporate ethos, transformed growth into an end in and of itself. Second, the logic of colonization worked to shape members identities in the church such that the individual's identity became colonized and manufactured in the image of the church. In this sense, the logic of colonization that emerged in the megachurch represented both the inculcation of corporate logic into religion and the further extension of that logic into the churches' organizing practices.

Logic of Consumption

Despite my attempt at bringing an open mind to the ethnographic portion of the data collection, I did not expect to see a minister run on stage during the worship service at Unity Church to advertise the senior pastor's new line of designer t-shirts by throwing some free shirts to the crowd and offer free "swag" to the first one-hundred members to attend the membership class immediately following worship. In this context, consumption emerged as a constitutive

logic at both Apex and Unity Churches through the commodification of the church experience that reframed members' understanding of the practice of doing church and a manufactured an abdication of agency in the organizing process.

At the conclusion of the first teaching I heard at Apex Church, the pastor, who was actually a recording, asked everyone to close their eyes to pray. At the conclusion of the prayer, the congregation opened their eyes to see a transformed stage: the large screens that had been wheeled in at the conclusion of the opening songs were gone and in their place was the campus pastor who offered announcements, a brief benediction, and concluded the service. It was a seamless transition perfectly choreographed by the staff of the church. However, the curation of this technically beautiful performance was more than organizational theatrics, and the experience of the production derived from more than its visual elements. Lavender specifically told me that, for her, the magic went beyond the theatrics it "was the way the children's pastor at the time … presented the gospel to kids. … I was just really drawn to that because going to church felt like a really cool experience." Bella, while describing the theatrics of the church, reminded me that "what's most fulfilling is the word of God. And, I mean. You're going ultimately for the word of God, not a concert or, just like the music because its' like a concert looking stage." Along these lines, Peter talked about his appreciation for Apex Church's willingness to invite quality speakers that "probably ha[ve] a dozen plus books published. They've probably got a TV show or a Radio show. They are probably influential speakers. It's not just that guy's turn to speak this week." Beyond these markers of quality, members emphasized that there was simply an aspect of attending church that made them feel good; Oliver likened the experience to "having dinner out at a nice restaurant" and furthered that:

> I am hungry when I get there. I'm spiritually hungry, emotionally, socially hungry. If like being there and I get fed while I'm there. And when I leave I feel better than when I got there. And I feel good enough that I am able to share some of my life with somebody else who needs some feeding, too. So, it's just a constant. It's just like air to breathe.

This is the commodification of the church experience. Here, members are describing how the logic of consumption transmogrifies the church experience into a commodity, a spectacle to which members are invited to observe and then participate in its manufacture as a supplicant.

This commodification of the church experience also relegated members in the organizational process in such a way that members began to identify more as church consumers than as church members. At one point, while describing his frustration with the teachings about tithing at Apex Church, as relayed in the section on teaching, Peter remarked that, "If AT&T can handle millions of subscribers, [Apex] can handle 35,000." This narration reveals the negotiation of the relationship between church and member. Here, Peter described himself as nothing more than a customer at the church, comparing his relationship with the church to that of one of the largest corporations in the world. This exemplified the transformation of the member into a consumer of the church product rather than as an active participant in its constitution. Essentially, members narrated how they abdicated their agency in favor of passive supplicancy in the organization. This occurred to such a great extent that one member of Unity Church refused to talk to me unless I could prove I was a member of the church for fear of repercussion because, she said she felt she couldn't speak for the church. She later blocked me on the platform we were using to communicate. And even when members felt comfortable enough to voice their opinions, as Lavender put things, "it just happened from higher up. They just decided to put different people in place that made changes that they thought were for the better, but I didn't really agree

with them." Even in the full context of the interview, Lavender only referred to church leadership as the monolithic, faceless *they* rather than any specific individual in the church; she was not alone in this—no member interviewed for this study used any language of reflecting ownership in the church. It is telling that no member referred to either Apex or Unity as *their* churches they were simply, as Ariana put it, "I kinda just go to church there." For Lavender part, despite frustration with her inalterable circumstances, she still felt that her experience has been worthwhile "and that it's cool to get to know that I was a part of" the child ministry produced by Unity Church that "people from all over the country." Later, she contacted me to say that she had left Unity Church and was seeking a new church home; her story serves as a clear picture of the logic of consumption at work, and when she could not seek to create change in an ossified product of church, she sought other opportunities.

In answer to the final research question, how does spectacle shape member's narrated experience, the data suggest that an emergent logic of consumption transformed the performance of church into a discursive product for members to consume while those same members relegated themselves to positions of passivity in the organizing process. For the members of Apex and Unity Churches, the logic of consumption as a spectacle manufactured a church experience that was perfectly curated as a commodified experience for them to consume and let be, and because of that image of the church as a product; as an ossified experience; an undemocratic, extant object, members essentially left the performance of church to the professionals and abdicated their place in constituting, maintaining, and changing that Discourse wherever they disagreed with it.

Summary of Results

This chapter has explored the results of the deconstruction analysis of identification processes in Christian megachurches as they intersect with, and are transformed by, the emergence of corporate colonizing and spectacular forces. The instances of micropower uncovered in this analysis occurred in the context of welcoming, comforting, relating, teaching, engaging, and committing within the church. All of these contexts antenarratively deconstruct in member talk, organizational texts, and ethnographic experience as polyphonic linguistic expressions of the power of the church over members. Further, the analysis detailed three emergent forces as logocentrisms that include logics of personalization, colonization, and consumption. These three forces guided members' interpretation of their experience in the context of church organizing such that the identification processes they described are fundamentally mired in spectacular processes, steeped in an ethos of colonization, and constructed as a process of consumption. In the context of these results, the next chapter will proceed to discuss the practical and theoretical import of these findings in the context of previous research and as they suggest new avenues for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

This study has explored the interrelations between member identity, narrative sensemaking, and capitalist spectacle in the Christian megachurch. As revealed through the deconstruction analysis, church Discourse was underwritten by four main logocentrisms that colonized the ethos of the church itself. These revealed how members identified with the church in terms of their own interpretation of spectacular narratives characterized by a logic of personalization and adaptation. Further, the analysis demonstrated how the logic of expansionism shaped members experience of the church while justifying the size of the church through a concept of market competition. Finally, members' talk revealed a logic of commercialization whereby members narrated their own lack of agency in the overarching structure of the megachurch and shaped their identities in terms of consumption of the church message. These results suggest two theoretical implications for the intersections of identification, narrative, and dramaturgy that lay the groundwork for the restorying of the megachurch as an organizing force constituted through member talk and storytelling practices.

First, the analysis suggests a concept of spectacle that, more than a facet of technology and media, relies upon narrative to construct and reconstruct mechanisms of control and foment supplicancy among members. Second, the results of the present study warrant a reframing of the normative understanding of identification processes in postmodern organizing and suggest that identification in postmodern organizing emerges through forces of spectacular division that isolates members and reframes their concept of agency in organizing. Next, in the context of these two theoretical implications, this chapter will detail the conclusion of the deconstruction analysis by engaging in a restorying, recentering process to help craft a path forward for positive organizational change for the membership and examine further, the practical implications of this

study. Finally, the chapter will end with a discussion of the limitations of this study and future lines of inquiry for researchers.

Narrative Spectacle

Spectacle, as foundational logic for organizing in the capitalist theatre (Boje, 2017), transforms the nature of organizing practices and its relation to the normalization of oppression and subjugation of members. However, in the bulk of extant research, spectacle is treated as a tool for understanding interrelations between media and cultural fetishism in an organizational context (Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman, 2004; Gillmore, 2008). This seems to be in line with Debord's presentation of the spectacle as a product of mass communication and the production of images. The results of this study tell a different story of spectacle; one that is shaped less by the theatrics of its telling and more by the content of the tale itself. Further, in the context of Boje's (2017) adaptation of the spectacle in the framework of organizational theater, understanding the spectacle as a manifestation of technology and presentation seems woefully out of line with Boje's own concept of organizing and the analysis presented here. Instead, the results of this study suggest a reframed understanding of *narrative spectacle* that presents spectacle as both emergent *in* narrative logic and *as* narrative itself. This section seeks to detail this concept of narrative spectacle in fundamentally communicative terms, as a function of narrative sensemaking processes in a critical dramaturgical framework and not simply as a factor of the means of communicating it.

Reframing the Spectacle

Debord's (1990) fatalistic interpretation of the state of the integrated spectacle in society and its continued role in oppressing the masses in an inescapable spiral of fragmentation and unification is as disturbing as it is fruitful for the organizational scholar seeking to understand the

nature of agency for those engulfed in spectacle. It is the nature of concentrated spectacle, as Debord described it, to manufacture an identity of complacency within the spectator. Specifically, Debord (1967/1995) described the spectacle as a *"Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated" (p. 5). In other words, Debord conceived of the spectacle as a worldview that itself has become an objectified reality through media presentations. Best and Kellner (2001) illustrated the corruption of the concentrated spectacle even further into the megaspectacle, which they described as a "significant escalation of the spectacle in size, scope, and intensity" (p. 226) that resulted from the explosion in information technology and the resulting cultural change. Boje (2017) further expanded on the emergence of the megaspectacle in the logic of late capitalism. Boje added that, as the megaspectacle expands and engulfs discourse, it transforms the spectator into a materialism-supplicant through the media sensation.

However, this picture of the spectacle as a facet of media or the theatricality of the presentation fails to explain the nuanced experience of the spectacle as the members of the megachurches in this study described it. Simply put, researchers can understand spectacle as emergent from the storytelling dynamics of organizational discourse rather than conceiving of spectacle as a facet or characteristic of a message itself. Although the media, the flash-and-bang, the smoke and mirrors, are all part of the spectacle, the member narratives here suggest a further dimension of spectacle that involves a narrative element that is unaccounted for in previous presentations of the concept. For the members of the megachurches examined in this study, the unifying, concentrating force of the spectacle of the church did not *just* come from the presentation elements of the worship service—it was embedded in the narrative logic of the sermon itself and in the sensemaking practices of organizing. Given this emergence of a two-fold

narrative spectacle, I theorize of narrative spectacle in two forms: spectacle *in* narrative and spectacle *as* narrative.

Spectacle in Narrative

Contra Debord's (1967/1995) presentation of spectacle as a facet of media and communication, spectacle can emerge as part of members' narrated understanding of organizing practice. These spectacles *in* narrative can function as concentrated, diffuse, or integrated spectacle insofar as they craft unity, division, or combine the two to manufacture control in the minds of the spectators. In this way, this understanding of spectacle *in* narrative is in keeping with much of Debord's view of spectacle. This reframed concept of spectacle still functions to craft an objectification of the reality of the organization within the mind of the spectator and frames objective reality in terms of the organization itself; however, it does this insofar as it emerges in the narratives members tell about organizing. Just as, within the concept of the storytelling organization (Boje, 2008) the organization itself emerges in narrative form, so, too, the analysis presented in this study suggests that the power of spectacle emerges *in* the narratives members tell about the organizing process. For example, as members narrated their understandings of the megachurch as a biblical church, they described a diffuse spectacle *in* narrative that was a fragmented understanding of the place of the Bible as a foundation for the churches' teachings; however, this spectacle did not derive its power from the media of the church or the lighting design—it was narrated into existence by the members as they described their experience. Simply, instead of understanding spectacle as a characteristic of performance, framing spectacle *in* narrative acknowledges that the spectacular forces of unification and division derive from the narratives from which they emerge. Fire and smoke and the booming voice were impressive, but it was the narratively constructed mythology of the Wizard that kept

the citizens of the Emerald City in line. Similarly, in the megachurch, while the performance and the theatrics of the church enhance and alter the nature of spectacle, the oppressive power of the spectacle is derived from members' emplotment of organizational narrative.

This notion of spectacle *in* narrative frames spectacular processes in organizing as embedded narrative constructions. For the members of Apex and Unity Churches, spectacle emerged *in* the narratives of welcoming members told, among other examples. Here, the narrative of welcoming is a concentrated narrative spectacle that emerges from the members' narrated accounts of being welcomed into the church. This is part of the unifying, concentrated spectacle that creates the illusion of equity among members in the church; they are all welcomed in despite their flaws, therefore they are equal except for everything else about their experience. In this sense, while there is still clear room for an evaluation in the performative and mediated aspects of the spectacles' emergence, it is narrated *in* the members' experiences, not emergent in its delivery. This reframed notion of spectacle, then, embraces the same power of the spectacle and its insidious transformation of the relationship between consumer and producer while giving voice to its emergence in organizing processes.

Spectacle as Narrative

Spectacle can also emerge as part of the narrative process of sensemaking in organizing. This is spectacle *as* narrative. In this sense, spectacle is a fragmented, discursive construction that undergirds the logic of organizing and emerges in narrative form. Theorizing of spectacle *as* narrative positions spectacle as a guiding force of organizational sensemaking rather than simply as a result of the interpretive process of organizing. Boje (2017) described in his critical dramaturgical perspective the spectacle as the theatre in which the performance of organizing occurs; however, understanding spectacle *as* narrative rejects the concept that spectacle is an

inherent, objective reality in capitalist organizing. Instead spectacle is an actively constructed, fragmented logic that guides the sensemaking process. In the context of Derridean (1967/1997) deconstruction, it is easier to understand it as the networked logocentrism. Just as Boje (2001) places the antenarrative as the mediator between lived story and narrated experience, then, the concept of spectacle *as* narrative examines spectacle as a discursive frame in which this organizing process occurs, but the frame is not fixed. Spectacle is not fixed! It emerges from the interwoven logics of antenarrative. This recognizes the social construction of the constitutive logic of organizing. Whereas most research posits the spectacle as a function of the postmodern era of organizing (Best & Kellner, 2001; Debord 1967/1995, 1990; Boje, 2017), understanding spectacle *as* narrative acknowledges its emergence as a discursive process rather than as an extant reality of epochal organizing. And while the logic of personalization, as it shaped members' experiences in Apex and Unity Churches, was certainly not insulated from the discourses and narratives of the capitalist society in which the churches function (quite the opposite, actually), framing spectacle *as* narrative helps to explain the interaction and the adaptation of a capitalist logic in the religious framework of a megachurch.

Further, spectacle *as* narrative frames spectacle as a constitutive logic of the organizing process that guides members interpretations of their own storied, lived experiences. In the present study, spectacle emerged as narrative most clearly in members' experiences of the logic of consumption. Members experienced the transformation of the church experience into a commodity (an example of spectacle in narrative) and revealed their own inculcation of the logic of consumption by narrating away their own agency and positioning themselves as consumers of the church rather than as members. In this way, emergent spectacle as narrative provides a clearer framework through which to understand the construction of supplicancy through

spectacle. As Boje (2017) described it, the spectacle manufactures supplicancy by transforming the individual from a passive spectator to a co-constructor of spectacle as both spectator and spectated. Theorizing of spectacle *as* narrative details this as a fragmented process of complexity. In this understanding of organizational theatrics, not only is the lived experience shaped by antenarrative, the antenarrative process itself is shaped by the higher-order, fragmented spectacle that cements the logic of organizing. In the churches, this emerged as members discussed how antenarratives of committing and engaging in the church shaped their relation to the church and manufactured concomitant feelings of isolation from the church and unity within it. There is spectacle *in* the narratives of members' individual feelings; there is spectacle *as* the fragmented narrative of personalization recombines the dialectical isolation and unity into a coherent experience for the member in the church. It is in this process that the member is invited on stage, to participate in the construction of the spectacle itself through words and performance in the organizing process. It is also in this process that the spectacle colonizes the individual voice and reshapes their sensemaking processes in terms of the logic of the spectacle itself. Boje (2017) describes this concept as materialism-supplicancy crafted by the theatres of capitalism itself; however, spectacle *as* narrative reframes this supplicancy as discursive supplicancy—recognizing that the member is beholden not to the material aspects of spectacular organizing but to the narrative that empowers that spectacle.

Identifying through Spectacle

As Burke (1945) described it, the process of identifying serves as a counterpoint to the inherent divisions in society. Where there is fractured understanding, identification, as a symbolic process of social relations allows humans to communicate and to persuade. For Cheney (1983a, 1983b), identification, similarly, provided a foundation for the creation of a joint

understanding for individuals to come together toward a common goal. Researchers have treated identification as a discursive negotiation through which individuals collectively struggle in order to find common meaning. However, the members' narrations of identifying in this study detailed a different experience marked by polysemy and plurivocality in the teaching of the church and its welcoming to all. Members described an experience of identification steeped in spectacle that crafted an image of the megachurch as the member desired to see it, while it simultaneously cemented the divisions inherent in the membership. This is the spectacle of the logic of personalization in the megachurch. In this sense, identification through spectacle is an inversion of the traditional understanding of identification processes—rather than a discursive process that unites individuals, it is a process of division that creates an "official language of generalized separation" (Debord, 1967/1995, p. 3). This section will examine this inverted concept of *identification through spectacle* as it emerged in the context of this study and as a hallmark of postmodern organizing processes.

Spectacular Identification

Identification is at the foundation of organizing. Without a common, discursively negotiated, symbolic foundation, organizing cannot occur (Cheney, 1983b). However, the results of the present study suggest that in a process of identification characterized by spectacle, organizing occurs as discursive forces isolate the individual member and from that isolation craft a sense of organizational identity based in spectacle. For the members of Apex and Unity Churches, narrated their position in the church in terms of the isolation that they felt within the overarching church framework; they described isolation as comforting, isolation as relating, isolation as engaging. How, then, does the notion of organization get spoken into existence? It is a process of colonization where spectacle overtakes the discursive practices of negotiating

organization and instead establishes a monolith of objective reality (Debord, 1967/1995). This is not to say that the spectacle itself is able to manifest the organization as an objective reality; rather, the role of the spectacle is to construe the organization as the incontrovertible monolith in order to manufacture within members a sense of comfort in the stability or, at the least, a quiet resignation to the unchanging nature of the crafted organizational reality.

Spectacle of the Self

Communication scholarship positions identity and identification both as performance and process (Burke, 1945; Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Scott et al., 1998) that emerge in the context of organizing influences. Specifically, Scott et al. (1998) framed the interaction between the dialogically constructed structures of organizing and the continued performance of identity in a complex interplay. However, this negotiation of both identity and organization is fundamentally a discursive process, and the nature of spectacle transmogrifies identification into a process of fracturing the socially constructed, shared understanding of the rules and resources upon which individuals attempt to negotiate their identities. For the members of Apex and Unity Churches, these fractures emerged in the plurivocality inherent in the teachings of the church and in their own understanding of the process of committing to the church. Where spectacle abolishes the need for a discursively negotiated common ground for organizing to occur, the member cannot easily identity their place in the organization. Or, in another way, they cannot find their place in the conversation of organizing as an ongoing negotiation through discourse.

This fracturing of the identification process not only impacts organizing on the whole but also alters the performative construction of identity in the context of the rules and resources of the organization (Scott et al., 1998). Where organizing processes are mired in polysemy, the member constructs their identity in terms of the spectacle itself. In this manner, the members

actually begin to perform the identity of the spectator, marked by alienation from labor, production, and from the very notion of identity itself. Along these lines, the logic of colonization in megachurches reinforces a sense of corporate ethos in the mind of the members of the church, urging growth as both a value of the church and its justification for existence. This explains how the members of Apex and Unity Churches constructed their position as consumers of church rather than members of it. As individuals begin to identify with the spectacle as "the general law of obedience to the course of things," (Debord, 1967/1995, p. 61), they become identified with everything and therefore nothing, and in the unity that the member feels there is a profound misery disguised by the illusion of choice, agency, and freedom. In the megachurches, members experienced this misery as a profound loneliness salved over by the spectacular unification of the congregation in worship. Where engaging in the worship masked the experience of isolation, the spectacle of the megachurch crafted unity, a generalized language of isolation. Members of both churches described comfort in their own isolation, and as they sought comfort in isolation, they found the spectacle of the church and became spectators to their glorious unification in worship. In this way, the process of identifying as a spectator is part of a colonization of identity and its reshaping in terms of the corporate ethos of the megachurch.

Restorying the Megachurch

Restorying is the eighth step of Boje's (2001) method of story deconstruction. However, though it represents part of the whole of deconstruction, an examination of the emergent deconstruction in the data must precede the restorying process. As Boje describes it, the process of restorying or resituating narratives allows researchers to create new scripts for organizational change. In this sense, it is because of, not in spite of, the social construction of oppressive forces in organizing that post-modern research can attempt to craft a new way forward for

organizational change while keeping in mind that, as Derrida (1967/1997) recognized, deconstruction should be an act of care with positive organizational change in mind. Even if it is not a perfect path, it is one that is aware of at least some of the problematic logics that pervade the previous narrative centers. Beyond this recentering, this section will present the practical implications of this research for megachurches and other organizing practices in the context of this restorying.

Restorying Personalization

Within the overarching logic of the church, the logic of personalization crafted the image of the church as everything a member could want; however, at the same time personalization relies upon the isolation of the member such that even as they feel a close, personal connection with those on stage at worship, and everyone else in the congregation, that feeling of unity is only a product of spectacle. But, the members of the church can restory this logic of personalization in the church into one of connection. Though some members emphasized the impact that connection in small groups provided for them, the feeling is both a product of relational labor, which the church exploits, and is not universal. Despite the size of the megachurch, it is possible to create a closer sense of community in the church through an emphasis on connection beyond the church. By resisting the urge to only contextualize those relationships developed *in* the church as relationships *for* the church, members can craft a logic of connection that encourages small-talk, encourages passive interaction beyond the simple niceties of holding the door open so that every member gets into the sanctuary, and encourages the development of relationships beyond the doors of the church and beyond the context of religion. For churches large and small, practically, the reinforcement of connection among

members that extends beyond the reach of the organization is key to restorying a logic of personalization based in isolation.

Restorying Colonization

The focus on growth and expansion in the megachurch makes sense in the context of modern organizing; however, it is still damaging for the members who are affected by it. The logic of colonization is not only part of the ethos of the churches, but it is also, in many ways, responsible for the churches' abilities to put on the type of worship services and reach the numbers of people that they do. However, the emphasis on expansion in the church, especially as it becomes so intricately intertwined with the constructed image and identity of the church, is transformative. In this way; the logic of colonization has turned what should be a house of prayer into a den of thieves—thieves selling branded Bibles, artisanal lattes, and designer t-shirts. To restory this logic of colonizing, the members of the church can refocus their energy from expansion of the church and its corporate justification on the growth of the individual. Further, as the spectacle of colonization seeks competitive advantage through the disenfranchisement of other religious institutions who are simply not as large, it is possible to restory the logic of growth in the corporate megachurch. But there is a distinction between growing a church through evangelism and justifying the foundation of the church on the principle logic of growth. Within the megachurch, treating growth as an end in and of itself is simply a product of a corporate ethos that hurts members and invites spectacle logic to recreate the church in the image of capitalist fancy. Practically, then, members in megachurches and in other churches seeking to grow can reframe the logic of colonization with a logic of natural growth that emphasize the healthy, natural growth of an organization over time without pursuing growth invariably as the sole dogmatic aim and end of the organization.

Restorying Consumption

Finally, the logic of consumption has an insidious impact on the relationship between religious organizations as a whole and the members who comprise it. By relegating members to a position of church consumer, isolating them from the discursive processes that form the basis of organizing, and constructing a monolithic, unchanging image of the megachurch, the logic of consumption erodes the very foundation of organizing and sets the stage for abuses of the membership by the organizations and their leadership. Thus, instead of a logic of consumption, members can reframe the logic of the church in terms of a logic of citizenship. By rejecting the distance that the spectacle constructs between the membership and the megachurch and by staking claim and ownership in the organization, the membership can deconstruct the logic of consumption and craft for themselves new discourses for even more positive organizational change beyond that articulated in this thesis. Practically, then, this notion of restorying for citizenship holds value for other organizing contexts, too. Where there is a perception of powerlessness, there is a narrative spectacle actively repressing opposition. As Boje (2001) noted, it takes far more power to maintain the centers of power that guide the interpretation of polysemous language—because language is inherently unstable. Insofar as power is constructed through language and social interaction that is characterized by that instability, so is power inherently unstable and vulnerable to restorying.

Limitations and Future Research

Research that employs critical and post-modern methods and epistemologies will always be limited in its generalizability and scope. Such is the case with this research, too. The conclusions of this research are limited due to the phenomenological position of the researcher and his role in constructing a narrative to tell the story of this research. Further, due to the focus

on two of the largest megachurches in the United States, these results may not be representative of other megachurches of different size and of different denominations. Each megachurch is constructed and constructs d/Discursive practices differently, but that does not discount the conclusions found here—it is simply a call for broader swaths of inquiry from different theoretical and methodological bents to have a crack at understanding the complex quagmire from which megachurches emerge, and how those processes, in turn, transform the lives of the millions of people who attend their services.

Considering these limitations and, in keeping with the call from Buzzanell and Harter (2006), further organizational research must begin to examine contexts of organizing outside of the normative realms of employment and business and other forms of labor. The nature of organizing is changing; it is no longer enough for the study of organizing to occur inside of the buildings or contexts focused on labour. Organizing is occurring online, in streets, in movements, and in the decision-making processes that surround every institution and hashtag. The unique place of communication researchers in organizational studies cannot be overstated; transformations in society have changed the ways that individuals come together for a common purpose, in churches, online, and in every other context. Researchers must explore all these areas now to maintain the relevance and the import of the inquiry. Additionally, this thesis offers an argument for further employ of postmodern epistemologies and methods, like deconstruction, as a positive tool for knowledge building in organizational communication and social science. As Best and Kellner (1997) reminded researchers, post-modern science, among other "post" ventures, aims at criticism of institutions and knowledge building practices in an effort to improve, enlighten, and emancipate, not to destroy or to reduce knowledge building enterprises to meritless relativism. Simultaneously, by describing this work as post-modern social science, I

urge inclusion of other social-science methodologies in the dialogues. Just as post-modern scientists must be allowed in the conversation, so, too, they must recognize the merits, the work, and the knowledge produced by the methods that they critique.

Next, in context of the recognition of *identifying through spectacle* as a subversion of the normative understanding of identification processes, researchers can adapt this reframed understanding of identification in a postmodern era to other contexts for organizing and to more fully explore the nature of identification processes as they have changed. Future post-modern and critical research can examine how this reframed concept of identification affects other aspects of organizational life and further oppresses individuals or foments power structures in organizing processes. Quantitative work can also incorporate the concept of identification through spectacle to develop, further, an understanding of the deleterious effects of such an experience for organizational members. Descriptive qualitative work that does not incorporate critical or postmodern attitudes can investigate and aid in the identification of the nuances in the experience of spectacle and identities of consumption in religious and other contexts.

Finally, the reframed concept of *narrative spectacle* can offer a wealth of directions for future research. By understanding spectacle as communicatively constituted in narrative, researchers can go beyond analyses that examine the mediated nature of communication and its manifestation as spectacle. Further, by understanding *spectacle as narrative* as a logic of organizational practice, as the narratively constructed theater in which organizing occurs (Boje, 2017), organization communication scholars can critically examine the use of spectacle logics of unification and fragmentation in other contexts that may not be characterized by the same theatricality but nonetheless act as spectacle.

Summary

This thesis has explored the interrelations of identity and identification; narrative sensemaking; and spectacle theater in organizing processes through a deconstruction analysis of member narratives, organizational documents, and ethnographic data in one of the largest growing types of institutions in American religious life: megachurches. The findings of this study offer a challenge to normative understandings of identification processes in organization as one of unity and instead posits that spectacle forces endemic to postmodern organizing processes rely on the cementation of division in order to craft a contradictory sense of unity in the organization. This *identifying through spectacle* isolates individuals and, in doing so, functions to control members and colonize their voices in the organizing process. Further, the findings suggest a nuanced understanding of spectacle in organizational contexts as it emerges as *spectacle in narrative* and *spectacle as narrative*. This communicative reframing sets the stage for future research examining the construction of spectacular narrative logics in organizational theatre. Finally, insofar as megachurches represent some of the fastest growing religious institutions in the United States and throughout the world (Thumma & Bird, 2015) and are a quintessential instance of capitalist transformation of societal institutions, I hope that this study can offer an impetus for the future examination of other organizing contexts and practices as they are transformed by economic influences and, in-turn, transform those economic influences.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

I. How did you come to be a member of [megachurch]?
II. Have you held membership at other churches in the past?
    a. If Yes: How does [megachurch] compare to aspects of the other churches where you have held membership?
III. What about [megachurch] drew you to become a member?
IV. What are your favorite (and least favorite) parts of attending [megachurch]?
V. How would you characterize your membership with [megachurch] to a friend?
    a. A prospective member?
VI. How active would you describe your membership with [megachurch]?
    a. How often do you attend worship services?
        i. Bible studies?
        ii. Other activities?
    b. Do you engage in the church material online?
VII. What is the most important part about being a member of [megachurch]?
VIII. Have you ever considered leaving [megachurch]? If so, why?
IX. What aspects of church membership do you find most engaging or rewarding?

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VITA

Timothy Everett Simeon Betts was born on November 9, 1995 in Irving, Texas. He is the son of Kristi McCown Betts and Walter Betts. He graduated in 2013 from Nimitz High School in Irving, Texas and continued his education at Texas Christian University. He graduated from TCU in 2017 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Philosophy, with minors in Communication Studies and History, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Economics, with a minor in Mathematics.

After receiving his undergraduate degrees from Texas Christian University, he pursued his Master of Science degree at the Bob Schieffer College of Communication where he held a Graduate Teaching Assistantship from 2017-2019. During this time, he was a graduate assistant coach for the TCU Speech & Debate team and worked as a student consultant at the Information Technology Helpdesk. After graduating with his Master of Science degree, he will pursue the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication at the University of Southern Florida in Tampa, Florida. He is a member of the National Communication Association and the national forensic honorary, Pi Kappa Delta.

ABSTRACT

A POSTMODERN NARRATIVE EXAMINATION OF IDENTIFCIATION IN CHRISTIAN MEGACHURCHES

by Timothy Everett Simeon Betts, 2019
Department of Communication Studies
Texas Christian University

Thesis Advisor: Amorette Hinderaker, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Building from Deetz' (1992) supposition that the corporation has supplanted the church as the modern social institution, this thesis examines identification processes in Christian megachurches from a postmodern, narrative perspective. Using a deconstruction analysis of ethnographic data, collected organizational documents, and member interviews from two megachurches, this thesis frames identification in the Christian megachurch as a critical, antenarrative process of organizational storytelling (Boje, 2001) and critical dramaturgy (Boje, 2017). Findings suggest that three logics of personalization, colonization, and consumption characterize the identification process and shape the spectacle or organizational identification within the megachurches examined.