



2011-07-15

# A Hell House Divided: Performing Identity Politics through Christian Mediums of Proselytization

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A Hell House Divided: Performing Identity Politics through  
Christian Mediums of Proselytization

Allan Nathan Davis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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Rodger Sorensen  
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August 2011

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## ABSTRACT

### A Hell House Divided: Performing Identity Politics through Christian Mediums of Proselytization

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Master of Arts

Every year, during the month of October, hundreds of Christian churches throughout the United States open the doors of their Hell House to surrounding communities. Hell Houses are Christian haunted houses designed to literally scare the Hell out of visitors so they will accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. In the place of vampires or zombies, Hell Houses portray the sins Satan is mostly likely to tempt teenagers to commit. Scenes include young girls receiving abortions, young men believing lies that they were born gay, and careless individuals drinking and driving. As para-theatrical performances, Hell Houses lead guests from one vignette to the next until they reach Heaven and Hell to show the eternal consequences of one's behavior.

A Hell House is a medium of proselytization. Believers within the larger US American Evangelical Christian community organize these events to facilitate the conversion of others. In this thesis, I explore how the use of Hell Houses and other mediums of proselytization are justified within religious-based communities through the implementation of what I refer to as a discourse of neutrality. According to religious-based communities because mediums of proselytization simply convey spiritual truth and reality to those outside of the community, they depict "how things really are." However, I argue that the use of each medium both reflects a perception of reality and contributes to the creation of that reality. Describing and discussing the mediums as "neutral" to the processes of creating reality and meaning generates an authoritative power to legitimately define the politics and boundaries of the religious community's identity. Furthermore, it masks the role each medium plays in the creation of reality as well as the tensions within the community to authoritatively define the "Evangelical Christian" identity.

In this thesis, I explore Hell Houses as mediums of proselytization where Evangelical Christians perform their identity politics. To conduct this analysis, I examine how other mediums of proselytization associated with Hell Houses (i.e., the physical body, conversation-based evangelism, and the Internet) each depend upon their own discourse of neutrality to thrive in the community. Because each medium is seen as neutral, those who champion its usage garner an authoritative legitimacy to define the community's identity and Christianity along the lines of reality as informed by the supposedly neutral medium. Here, I detail the dynamics of the tensions within a significant and complex religious group in contemporary America and how performative practices within the community inform its identity politics.

Keywords: religious performance, evangelical Christianity, identity, proselytization, new media, body

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, Mark and Kathy Davis, for supporting all of my endeavors. It is a rare gift to receive such genuine praise and encouragement, especially when the decision to study and teach theatre history supplants a former childhood desire to enter the legal profession. Their love and commitment to me and my education have opened countless doors in my life and are testaments to the principle of sacrifice.

To Dr. Kristin L. Matthews, for teaching me how to write with strength, character, and precision. I hope, one day, I can teach a class like she does.

To Dr. Wade Hollingshaus, for contributing to my spiritual development as well as my intellectual growth. He is a model of integrity and faith. I want to be like him when I grow up.

To the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, the Mary Lou Fulton Chair, and the Department of Theatre and Media Art for the funding that made my research possible.

To the many friends that listened to me talk about this project a lot for two years. Special thanks to Brett Hurst, Casey Walrath, Eric Cunningham, Lauren Costa, and Samantha Cervetti.

To the best co-hort a graduate student can have, my gratitude abounds for Katherine Williams Olsen, Amy Isaksen Cartwright, Jayna Butler, and Sandra Millet, as well as for Haleh Risdana and Jaynanne Meads.

Finally, to Dr. Megan Sanborn Jones, there is not enough that can be said for the impact such a mentor has had on my life. I can only say that through her passion, intelligence, commitment, and teaching, she literally changed the course of my life. I am who I am now and I will be whoever I will be at some later date because of her and all she has taught me. Because I doubt my ability to adequately thank her for all of the time, instruction, laughter, work, skills, and memories we have shared, I hope this highly sentimental solution will do: Dr. Megan Sanborn Jones, I dedicate this thesis to you.

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## Chapter One

### An Introduction

In 2006, at the twilight of my adolescence, the age of twenty, I taught a man and woman in their early forty's about God's eternal plan for each of them by literally using a house and the property it sat on. I lived in an isolated town in central Oregon spending my time knocking on doors, carrying around a copy of The Book of Mormon, and teaching people about Jesus. Like many young men in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), when I turned nineteen I volunteered to serve as a proselytizing missionary in an area of the world relatively distanced from my immediate family. I spent two years in about four different areas of Oregon, with the sole purpose of my time and efforts dedicated to the conversion of others to my church and faith. LDS missionaries have specific principles and lessons regarding doctrinal particularities they teach to potential converts; however, we were also encouraged by church leaders to personalize lessons for our "investigators." I interpreted this admonition to permit some measure of creativity in proselytical pedagogy: so I used a house.

Generally, the methodological approach of instruction LDS missionaries use consists of sitting on a couch in someone's home, talking about faith, and referencing scriptures; however, on this one occasion I removed the lesson from this pattern and space. Members of the local congregation permitted us to use their home. My alteration to the approach was not radically complex: we started in a living room like normal, but then I proceeded to lead the two investigators outside, exiting the home through the back door. We walked around the side of the house towards the front door, paused for some time on the porch, and then reentered the home and returned to the place where we began. In my mind, this short sojourn and embodied archetypal journey facilitated an articulation of some of the basic principles underlying what Mormons believe about "the Plan of Salvation"—the great plan God has for all of humanity.

Usually, the second lesson LDS missionaries teach is the Plan of Salvation where eschatological beliefs regarding the purpose of everyone's mortal life could be likened to being a kid away at college. You start at home with your parents, go to learn somewhere else, and then return changed by the experience. Likewise, we once lived with God, we left His presence to live and learn on earth, and the plan is for us to return to live with him. I thought getting up and actually moving through the emblematic journey with both our discussion and our bodies would help make such ideas resonate with those we were teaching. When sharing these ideas, I did not only use the house as a space; I created a cast. The father of the family whose home we were in held a piece of paper indicating his role as God. He stayed in the house but watched us through and talked to us from a few windows. His five year old son volunteered to represent Jesus Christ, accompanying us outside along our mortal path. And then our investigators received name tags that had on them both their names and the names of Adam and Eve. The deliberate use of the house and the family members residing therein was designed to emphasize the significance of the family unit within the theological principles. My choices were meant to highlight that we should all consider our relationship to God in familial terms and that we should all perceive a divine essence or design within our individual families.

I pursued a pedagogical approach considered unconventional within the sphere of LDS missionary proselytization because I felt it would make the principles of the lesson easier to understand, more memorable, and—at some basic level—more “real.” I presumed inviting the investigators to participate in the embodiment, presentation, and representation of the abstract principles would facilitate their progression towards conversion. At the age of twenty, I certainly did not critically reflect on the import of how employing a different pedagogical modality for the purpose of proselytizing not only conveyed a message, but also constructed it. The performative

and para-theatrical elements of the instruction contributed to the possibility of meanings which can be absent in more dialogue-focused presentations of faith-based principles.

In some ways, that was the point because I hoped to reveal something that our investigator might not have had words for. LDS missionary proselytization rests on the scriptural belief that men and women are searching for God's truth and it is the responsibility of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to help such investigators find the truth that has been revealed to and through the LDS Church.<sup>1</sup> For a missionary, there is a Truth which has been hidden from people and his or her responsibility is to reveal that knowledge. Some missionaries use visual aids like flowcharts or diagrams to help communicate these ideas; I opted for a performative representation. But as stated, the very para-theatricality intended to convey my message, informed and shaped my "message." For example, at the time, I did not reflect on the meanings created by portraying God as stationary, within the house, and observant and communicative through a window.

In Christian efforts of proselytization, mediums of instruction and tools of proselytization are generally discussed in terms which characterize the mediums as passive or neutral in the process of meaning making. They are inert conduits, neither good nor evil on their own accord, but simply vessels capable of conveying information. I share my experience as an LDS missionary not to conduct a close reading of that event itself, but rather to indicate the particularities of my own subjectivity in a project concerned with the complexities regarding

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<sup>1</sup> Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-days Saints consider the Holy Bible to be scripture and the holy word from God; however, unlike many other Christian denominations, Latter-day Saints also revere other collections of writings as part of the holy word of God as well. These are comparable to the Bible. One work is the Doctrine and Covenants, a book that is mostly a collection of revelations Joseph Smith, the 19<sup>th</sup> century founder and prophet of the religion, claimed he received from the inspiration of God. Here I am referring to a particular verse often quoted in LDS culture in relation to missionary work. It reads: "For there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby the lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find—." See Doctrine and Covenants 123:12.



mediums of proselytization, American Christianity, and both the formation and the performance of faith-based identities. Additionally, my amateur and Mormon “Plan of Salvation House” and the subject matter of this thesis—namely Evangelical Christian Hell Houses—share intriguing similarities in their basic composition, structure, and overall purpose. Furthermore, the anecdote illustrates the significance in critically investigating the perceptions surrounding the mediums faith-based communities employ in their work of conversion. In this thesis, I specifically interrogate the prevalence and importance of the discourses of neutrality and passivity regarding various mediums utilized for proselytizing.

Quite simply, any work of proselytization requires some medium to convey a particular message; however, I intend to demonstrate how the advocacy for and use of a medium, which is signified as inherently neutral, reflects and creates ideological convictions regarding the medium. In American Evangelical Christian communities, the human body, verbal conversations and interactions, and the Internet are inherently devoid of intent; they are vessels which external essences—both evil and good—may animate for good or evil purposes. According to this paradigm, the body can be used to follow God’s commands to procreate or it can be used to revel in sin. The Internet might contribute to the formation of faith-based communities and the spread of the gospel, but it can also distribute pornography inspired by the devil. Framing and describing the medium as a passive tool or conduit is linked with a binarized expectation of the cosmos. It exemplifies beliefs regarding the possibility of either the redemption or damnation of human souls inasmuch as the medium is capable of participating in the work of either. More importantly, it also reifies the very constitution of a reality based on the binary of redemption and damnation because the mediums themselves can be reclaimed or corrupted. Positing the medium’s own propensity to either fate implies that ignoring the medium or neglecting its use

could lead to its unchallenged damnation, making it solely a force for evil. So, the inherent neutrality of a medium, or at least describing a medium as inherently neutral, necessitates the use of it.

Proselytization is immediately concerned with the renovation and transformation of an individual or a community's identity. It is a process of generating, articulating, and negotiating the boundaries that define the community's identity. Potential tensions within such a process are heightened by the fact that proselytization is about bringing converts across said boundaries. Any community, by definition, defines itself (in part) by those excluded from the community; but efforts in faith outreach and conversion attempt to maintain the exclusion while facilitating, encouraging, or coercing inclusion. How this process unfolds is shaped by the methodologies employed. The tools of proselytization reach across while erecting the boundaries that inform the identity politics of the community. Subsequent chapters will examine the process of negotiating community boundaries by detailing the process from three vantage points: (1) within the community as it conducts the efforts of outreach; (2) outside the community and how efforts of proselytization are perceived and shaped by the recipients of said outreach; and (3) inside a space where both groups directly contribute to the development of the initial community's identity.

Throughout this thesis I will examine the discourses of neutrality surrounding the mediums of proselytization utilized by American Evangelical Christian communities. I will constrain the subject matter of this project further by focusing my study on the implications and ideas surrounding three mediums operating within or in connection to one significant and specific medium of contemporary proselytization: Hell Houses. Hell Houses are sites where Evangelical Christians perform their faith with the intent to engender conversion. Their intent is countered by the fact that not all Evangelical Christians appreciate the beliefs Hell Houses reflect

or the image of Christianity they create. So Hell Houses and discussions surrounding them are also sites where an ownership over the formation and definition of an Evangelical Christian identity is contested. To some degree, contemporary Hell Houses, themselves, are based on mediums considered inherently neutral: Halloween haunted houses. However, I am more interested in three mediums considered inherently passive which also operate within or in connection to Hell Houses: (1) the bodies of participants and audience members in Hell Houses; (2) soft-sell verbal conversations and “realistic” presentations of self that are posited as a more Christ-like proselytizing alternative to Hell Houses; and (3) the Internet, which is used both to advertise and parody Hell Houses.

Ultimately, the discourse of inherent neutrality and passivity stems from an eschatological paradigm built on the binaries of Heaven and Hell; however, both the discourse and the mediums it informs engender that binarized cosmology. Even though Evangelical Christians utilize the body, verbal conversations, and the Internet as passive tools to convey messages for the conversion of others, the mediums both shape the messages they confer while constituting the reality of those messages for the believers delivering them. This thesis will detail the implications and dynamics of this process with a focus on Hell Houses to contribute to conversations regarding identity politics in faith-based communities. Hell Houses constitute sites of performance reflecting the beliefs of Evangelical Christians and the state of their relationships with those inside and those outside of their community and identity. As a contested form of performance and proselytization, Hell Houses perform within discussions where different factions struggle to control a voice of authority that will legitimize their definitions of “real” and appropriate Christian beliefs and behaviors. Exploring the use of various mediums, I demonstrate how positing the mediums of proselytization as neutral and passive procures such legitimacy and

authority because the utilization of the dynamic and meaning-making mediums actually creates the “reality” the mediums purport to reflect.

### **Defining Evangelical Christianity and Contemplating Personal Subjectivity**

A significant principle investigated in this thesis is the notion of “community,” and specifically how the US American Evangelical Christian community interacts with outsiders during the moments of proselytization. In this section, I outline the definitions informing the theorization operating in the argument of this thesis; or in other words, what I mean when I say “Evangelical Christian.” I also highlight my own subjectivity as a believing Mormon who spent two years of his life in America proselytizing—trying to teach other Christians, including Evangelical Christians, about Jesus Christ.

Defining “Evangelical Christian” is not particularly easy since it is not a religious identity stemming from any particular institutional affiliation. For the most part, it is often a self-identifying moniker which has a way of shifting depending on who is doing the self-identification. That said, sociologist Christian Smith offers some helpful distinctions which distinguish seemingly homogenous groups like Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and Conservative Christians. In his book *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*, Smith explains that sometimes the different categories overlap; however, each subgroup does stem from its own particular and recognizable history and tradition. While Pentecostals can be traced back to the Holiness-Methodist movement of the 1910s, Fundamentalists “emerged through a split with the modernist movement in American Protestantism in the 1920s.” Smith continues, “Fundamentalists emphasize biblical literalism, doctrinal purity, and separation from the

world.”<sup>2</sup> Evangelicalism is related to Fundamentalism; however, its existence indicates a break in cultural practices and theological beliefs as well.

According to Smith, Evangelicalism arose between the 1940s and 1960s as moderate Fundamentalists separated themselves from the “separatist” and “anti-intellectual” tendencies of other Fundamentalists. Since that time, both groups have defined themselves in opposition to the other. Like John Fletcher, an academic who has published on Hell Houses, I associate Hell Houses with an Evangelical rather than a Fundamentalist tradition, an argument which will be explained more fully in the next section. I concur with this classification because, among other arguments, Hell Houses are primarily proselytizing events. They are meant to bring people to Christ, not justify the theological designations of certain behaviors and actions as “sinful.”<sup>3</sup> Fletcher, basing his own work on Christian Smith’s definitions, sees this as one of the differentiations between the two groups. Evangelicals place a much greater emphasis on the importance of witnessing and influencing the culture of the world around them; while Fundamentalists, instead, emphasize a preservation of doctrinal purity and separating from the world.

Because Evangelicalism is transdenominational, theological beliefs within the identity or community range across a wide continuum. “Evangelical Christianity”—in terms of racial, socioeconomic, and theological markers—does not mean one thing; people who self-identify as evangelicals vary greatly from one another. However, according to Smith, there are four theological sentiments generally shared across the board: (1) Christ is the Son of God, born of Mary into the world to redeem mankind; (2) salvation comes through the cross; (3) the Bible is

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>3</sup> John Fletcher, “Tasteless as Hell: Community Performance, Distinction, and Countertaste in Hell House,” *Theatre Survey*, 314–15.

the Word of God and an authoritative text; and (4) God has commanded his believers to go into the world witnessing His name.<sup>4</sup>

Along a similar vein, in his book *unChristian*, David Kinnaman, himself an Evangelical Christian, used comparable criteria to define “Evangelical Christian” in his research to determine what people believe about Christians. According to Kinnaman, an Evangelical Christian is

First, a born-again Christian, which means he or she has made a confession of sin and profession of faith in Christ. Second, those who also believe that the Bible is accurate in the principles it teaches, who view God as all-powerful and perfect and involved in the world today, who contend that Jesus did not sin, who assert that Satan is a real spiritual being, who reject that heaven can be earned through good works, who believe Christians have a responsibility to share their faith with others, and who say their religious faith is very important in their life.<sup>5</sup>

Kinnaman’s definition and criteria for distinguishing between Evangelical Christians and non-Evangelical born-again Christians will be significant in Chapter Three. There, I conduct a close reading of his book and contextualize it within a larger conversation concerning how contemporary Christians recognize, address, and respond to outsiders’ perceptions of Christians. For now, it is worth mentioning inasmuch as my engagement with his text informed my understanding of what “Evangelical Christian” can mean.

This brings me to my own subjectivity. Before this project, I knew little of these distinctions which define minute but significant differences between the groups within the umbrella of “Conservative Protestants.” In fact, my understanding of “Evangelical Christians” stemmed partly from watching televised political punditry, but mostly from my service as a

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith, *Christian America?*, 15–18.

<sup>5</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 159.

missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The experiences I had with formulating my understanding of “Evangelicals” and “born-again Christians” were forged on the doorsteps and in the living rooms of homes in Oregon. The theologically-based discussions ranged from argumentative to amicable, but either way the conversations were always informed by a motivation on my part to do everything I could to facilitate that individual’s conversion to my way of thinking and believing. In a study on Hell Houses, which are designed and executed with the expressed intent to proselytize, I find it disingenuous to imagine that I could ever divorce myself from two years of my life that were dedicated to that type of focused energy, purpose, and deportment. When I read about Evangelical Christians and when I attended the Hell Houses to understand Evangelical communities, I brought those experiences from my missionary service with me. When I theorize and write about the significance of a proselytizing medium, I recognize that I come from a background invested in perfecting the art of proselytization. Finding people to teach and striving to improve methods of instruction were matters of many concentrated prayers. My interest in this project is related and connected to my own experience, but it is also worth noting that my own experience will always delimit my own comprehension of a proselytizing medium like Hell Houses.

Researching and writing this thesis, I am still an active and believing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Though I believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, according to David Kinnaman and most of the Christians operating the Hell Houses I went to, I am—technically—not a Christian. As a Mormon, I am, to them, an outsider; I will go to Hell unless I accept Jesus Christ into my heart. My own identity within Hell House spaces was destabilized because while I self-identify as a Christian, according to the politics and the structure of the events, I was not one. Additionally, as an academic who attended the events with

the objective to write about them, I experienced each Hell House according to the dictates of that subjectivity. Although I attempt to treat this subject material ecumenically, I recognize that how I read, perceive, and understand events—especially those in and surrounding Hell Houses—is informed by my own religious convictions, experiences, and beliefs.

### **Hell Houses: Descriptions, Origins, and Developments**

Before exploring my argument in this thesis more fully, it is necessary to contextualize this project within both a description and history of Hell Houses. After outlining the basic performative elements of an average Hell House and discussing the origins and development of the trend, I will also highlight significant milestones when Hell Houses crossed over into American popular culture. This will provide foundational markers to define the overarching medium this thesis is focusing on. Furthermore, contextualizing the practice in relation to its presence in popular culture will illustrate the dynamics between those inside and those outside the Evangelical Christian community as both struggle for authority to define what a Hell House has been and what it is now. By association, the tensions of that struggle play a role in who has authority to define what the identity of a Christian is or ought to be.

For starters, Hell Houses are para-theatrical performances organized and produced by Christian communities during the month of October, usually in response to Halloween. Simply stated, they are Evangelical Christian haunted houses which are designed to literally scare the Hell out of people who come so they will accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Proselytization is the primary purpose for the event; however, often the functions also serve as fundraising opportunities for the youth ministry groups and organizations involved. The communities that produce Hell Houses are either individual churches or a collection of churches pooling resources together. Almost every Hell House occurs within a converted space, usually an



annex of the church property like its youth center or simply the whole church building itself. In some instances, other property away from the church is utilized and in many such cases a Hell House haunted hay ride is often incorporated into the event. To some extent, Hell Houses fit into a larger trend of proselytization within the Evangelical Christian culture called drama ministries. Drama ministries use theatre and theatrical conventions as a form of outreach and instruction. However, in terms of the capital required—which comes in the form of volunteers needed; time commitments made for building and rehearsing; finances budgeted and spent on make-up, lighting, costuming, and sets—to say nothing of their national popularity, Hell Houses by far dwarf any other form of drama ministry, except possibly for passion plays.

Like many haunted houses, Hell Houses target adolescent audiences. Usually, church youth groups are either responsible for or highly involved in the organization and execution of the event. Most actors tend to be teenagers. Some audience members live near the sponsoring church; others travel impressive distances as youth groups.<sup>6</sup> Tickets are usually purchased at the door, though some venues sell tickets online. Usually, people attend in groups, wait in line for a while, follow volunteer guides (which are sometimes dressed like demons), and then make their way through a series of rooms populated by disturbing and spooky images. However, rather than filling rooms with traditional Halloween icons like skeletons, vampires, zombies, or mummies, Hell Houses showcase the horrors of sinful behavior and its eternal consequences.<sup>7</sup> And it is the conflation of both the behavior and God's condemnation of certain behaviors which generally unsettles audiences.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, when I was attending a Hell House in Arizona, there was a group of eight people in their twenties who drove about an hour to get there, but when I was in Tulsa, I saw a bus full of teenagers from St. Louis—a seven hour ride away.

<sup>7</sup> Like tradition haunted houses, Hell Houses will sometimes have witches. However, this is because they might want to depict the satanic origins and associations connected to Wicca or some other generalized form of paganism.

Hell Houses do not simply show teenage girls seeking abortions, homosexuals entering into relationships, or teenagers consuming alcohol; they depict girls dying during the abortion or committing suicide afterwards, gay couples dying of AIDS, and teenagers suffering in terribly bloody and gruesome automobile accidents caused by drunk driving. Every Hell House is different in the content it assembles; however, there are some recurring themes that are usually present: abortion, homosexuality, drunk driving, suicide, violence (whether it be domestic or gang related), and parties or raves which contribute to illicit drug usage, promiscuity (i.e., date rape), or violence. There is always a room that represents the darkness and abyss of Hell, decorated with a large, imposing devil, an entourage of creepy demonic minions, and normal teenagers being tortured for the beginning of their eternity there. Sometimes there is a representation of Heaven; more often than not though, instead, there is a room depicting Jesus Christ on a cross to emphasize and iterate the agony of his sacrifice for humanity's salvation. At the end of the presentation, representatives of the church invite audience members to pray with them or to act on the spirit they felt that night by confessing Christ as their Savior. Responding accordingly to such invitations indicates the purgation of Hell from one's soul—the performance successfully scared it out.

Technically, the history of Hell Houses spans over thirty years; however, contemporary projects are greatly informed by a series of events that occurred about fifteen years ago in the mid-1990s. In 1972, Jerry Falwell and students of Liberty University created *Scaremare*, which was not only the first Hell House but one that still stages presentations every Halloween. According to *Scaremare's* website, the event has taken place in four different locations over the last forty years, planning for it occurs throughout the year but the bulk of the work starts in August and continues through November, more than two hundred volunteers work each night of

production, and thousands of people attend each year.<sup>8</sup> In that time, again, according to the website, over three hundred churches have joined Liberty University in supporting and participating in projects like *Scaremare*.<sup>9</sup> It is unclear whether that number is referring to churches operating their own Hell Houses or if it simply means there are over three hundred churches that support *Scaremare* by sending youth groups to it. Either way, the practice has certainly proliferated throughout the country since 1972. During the 1980s, in the hands of other communities, the format of *Scaremare* took on different permutations becoming what are now referred to as (among other things) Hell Houses, Judgment Houses, Nightmare Houses, Tribulation Trails, and Revelation Walks. “Hell House,” however, has become the blanket or umbrella term to identify any of these performances. Many Hell Houses are approaching their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of annual operation. The Hell House in Cedar Hill, Texas depicted in George Ratliff’s documentary 2001 film *Hell House* reached this milestone in 2010. One I attended in Tulsa, Oklahoma will do so in 2012.

The field changed significantly in the mid-1990s when Pastor Keenan Roberts entered the arena and national spotlight. As John Fletcher mentions in his article, “Tasteless as Hell: Community Performance, Distinction, and Countertaste in Hell Houses,” Roberts created the appellation “Hell House.”<sup>10</sup> Though his first efforts occurred in New Mexico, when Keenan Roberts moved to the Denver area he standardized the Hell House format. This format is the one that consists of guided tours through scenario rooms, depictions of Hell and either Heaven or Christ on the cross, and an invitation to pray and accept Christ. Roberts’ format proliferated

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<sup>8</sup> “History,” *Scaremare: Your Final Destination*, accessed 10 November 2010, <http://www.scaremare.com>.

<sup>9</sup> “FAQ,” *Scaremare: Your Final Destination*, accessed 10 November 2010, <http://www.scaremare.com>.

<sup>10</sup> John Fletcher, “Tasteless as Hell: Community Performance, Distinction, and Countertaste in Hell Houses,” *Theatre Survey*, 314.

throughout the country after he assembled a kit that churches could purchase to assist them in the organization and execution of their own Hell House endeavors.

The kit primarily consists of advice for coordinating the entire project from beginning to end as well as suggestions for taking care of production elements. Sample scripts, set design pointers, and patterns for costume construction accompany detailed instructions outlining a distribution of responsibilities amidst a number of committees, suggestions for publicizing the events, and a sample schedule for pre-production deadlines. The kit also comes with a CD of sound effects. Originally, Roberts sold the outreach kit as a thick binder; however, in 2006, he started sending the kit as two DVDs: one with the previous kit information in a word document and the other with demonstration videos. Currently, Pastor Keenan Roberts and his church—the New Destiny Christian Center in Thornton, Colorado—sell the kit for \$299 (about \$320 after taxes and shipping costs). It comes with seven basic scenes. Additional scene descriptions can be purchased online; the price varies depending on the scene, but for the most part they range between \$40 and \$60 each. Plenty of churches produce their own Hell Houses without any assistance from Keenan Roberts, but his vigilant advocacy for the medium’s potential has greatly informed its national proliferation and reputation.

In 2001, documentary filmmaker George Ratliff released his film *Hell House*. Filmed in October 2000, the film tracks the planning and creation of the tenth Hell House in Cedar Hill, Texas produced by the Trinity Church. Ratliff’s depiction of the Hell House cultural phenomenon contributed to a popular cultural awareness of the proselytizing trend. When Public Radio International’s *This American Life* produced an episode about Hell Houses, they not only interviewed George Ratliff, but also played clips from his film and used the Cedar Hill

production as a focal point to guide their conversation of the greater trend.<sup>11</sup> For those unfamiliar with this type of Christian performance, Trinity Church's Hell House (and to some extent the documentary about it) became emblematic of the practice. It was the documentary that introduced Los Angeles-based actress and writer Maggie Rowe to the existence of Hell Houses.

Maggie Rowe is an important figure in the history of Hell Houses because she was primarily responsible for organizing and planning *Hollywood Hell House*, a secular parody of Hell Houses. As stated above, Rowe learned about Hell Houses from George Ratliff's 2001 documentary film *Hell House*.<sup>12</sup> After viewing Ratliff's film, she teamed up with Jill Soloway, another Los Angeles-based writer, to purchase a *Hell House Production Kit* from Pastor Roberts under the guise that they were affiliated with a West Hollywood youth ministry. With the kit, the writers assembled a number of comedians and celebrities, including Bill Mahar, Sarah Silverman, and Andy Richter. Maggie Rowe did not intend to change any of the content that came in the kit. According to an article in *Advocate*, she said one thing she wanted *Hollywood Hell House* to explore was whether or not the material was "ridiculous enough to parody itself."<sup>13</sup> The thought was that as writers Rowe and Soloway wouldn't need to do much to make it funny. The medium, removed from its community would mock itself. Reportedly, when Pastor Keenan Roberts found out what had happened, he traveled to Los Angeles to attend Rowe and Soloway's production on opening night. Before the trip, he indicated to Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*, "It's exciting. Hell House is going to another state of exposure."<sup>14</sup>

Much of the press surrounding the event foregrounded the idea of the event itself, to the point that there is little description of the production itself. There were more than 200 actors that

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<sup>11</sup> George Ratliff, "The Devil on My Shoulder," *This American Life*, Public Radio International, Chicago, IL: WBEZ, May 24, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Adam B. Vary, "Hell House of the Stars," *Advocate*, October 12, 2004, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Adam B. Vary, "Hell House of the Stars," *Advocate*, October 12, 2004, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Torkelson, "Pastor Wonders: What the H---?; Celebrities to Stage Hell House for Grins," *Rocky Mountain News*, August 17, 2004, A5.

rotated through the roles, a lot of dry ice was used, and some special effects artists were brought in to provide copious amounts of blood. According to Richard Rushfield's article on *Hollywood Hell House* in the *New York Times*, Rowe did execute authoritative control at times to make sure that the parody came through the deadpan delivery of the idea itself rather than a "misrepresentation." Reportedly, when some of the crew wanted to create a penis monster in Hell to torment the homosexuals there, Rowe said no. Rowe explained to Rushfield, "We felt as soon as we do that, we're doing a whole other thing. They [Fundamentalist Christians] would never show a fake penis. All of a sudden, we'd be on a whole different track."<sup>15</sup> The intent was to showcase how Hell Houses are simply absurd and ridiculous on their own accord. The production of *Hollywood Hell House* was quite successful. It drew significantly large crowds and received multiple reviews from critics across the nation. Again, they were more descriptive than either praiseworthy or critical. However, *Hollywood Hell House* was popular enough that it was reproduced in 2007.

Similar exposure arose in 2006 in New York City when *Les Freres Corbusier*, a theatre troupe based in New York, also purchased a kit from Pastor Roberts to produce their own Hell House. However, rather than planning to mount another parody, the company attempted to perform the event authentically. And instead of obtaining a kit under false pretense, they invited Pastor Roberts to participate in the creation of their production by serving as a consultant. In an article in *Material Religion*, Ann Pellegrini interrogated the theatre troupe's notion that they could "authentically" perform something they did not believe in. She noted Pastor Roberts still critiqued the play's lack of intensity, an opinion Pellegrini apparently shared. For her, the approach to present a "secular Hell House" as a "sociological artifact" divorced the production

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Rushfield, "Theater: Raising Hell," *New York Times* (New York, NY), August 29, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/29/theater/theater-raising-hell.html?scp=1&sq=hollywood%20hell%20house&st=cse>.

from the cosmological stakes driving “real” Hell Houses.<sup>16</sup> Still, the production prompted the publication of an article by the preeminent theatre critic Ben Brantley in the *New York Times* and a performance review in *Theatre Journal*.

Brantley wrote of the performance, “Because the interest of ‘Hell House’ is more anthropological than theatrical [. . .] there isn’t a lot for a theater critic to comment on.” Yet, he also added, “As someone who grew up among Southern Baptists, I can also vouch for the rightness of tone of the post-tour reception, where Kool-Aid and doughnuts are served to the strains of live Christian rock.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Brantley, suggested that while the production was going for an authentic presentation, perhaps more sincere and faithful to how Hell Houses “are really done” than what *Hollywood Hell House* presented, there was enough in and around the production to make it a “bring-your-own-irony sort of affair.”<sup>18</sup> The production ran for the month of October and received many good reviews. Critics considered it original, innovative, and well-executed. Despite Roberts’ opinion, New York audiences seemed to enjoy the production.

Because the production occurred in October 2006, it preceded the year 2007 by a few months. 2007 was a big year in the field of Hell House studies. First, it saw the publication of three scholarly articles on Hell Houses—items which make up more than half of the field and which are discussed more fully below. Second, two primetime network television series alluded to Hell Houses or made them integral parts of the their plots: NBC’s *Law & Order: Special*

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<sup>16</sup> Ann Pellegrini, “Helluva Play,” *Material Religion*, 353.

<sup>17</sup> Ben Brantley, “A Guided Tour of Hell, With an Appearance by Satan,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), October 14, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/14/theater/reviews/14hell.html?scp=1&sq=hell%20house%20ben%20brantley%20les&st=cse>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

*Victims Unit* and Fox's *Bones*.<sup>19</sup> Chances are more people saw the episodes of *Bones* or *Law & Order: SVU* than ever attended the *Hollywood Hell House* or *Les Freres Corbusier*'s production of *Hell House*. Each performance represented and contributed to an American pop culture awareness of and fascination with Hell Houses. Hell Houses have become emblematic of American Christianity. Additionally, the representations by outsiders each constitute interesting appropriations of a performative practice from a religious community. And that appropriation, in turn, necessitates a negotiation of the tensions between presenting and representing how a religious community presents and represents individuals and groups who are outside of their community. Hell Houses depict sinners that would not be considered Christians like teenage girls who get abortions in order to say something about Christians and outsiders. The secular representations showcase how Hell Houses depict abortion in order to say something about themselves and Christians. This is a process I touch on in Chapter Four when discussing how Christians and parodists perform "Christian" identities on the Internet.

### **Hell House Academics: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Or Who Watches the Watchmen?**

In this section, I will outline how my efforts in this thesis fit into larger discussions regarding Hell Houses by briefly reviewing the state of the field and demonstrating how my position as an academic invested in a young but established field contributes to my understanding of and capacity to theorize about Hell Houses, faith-based communities, and

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<sup>19</sup> In 1997, the cartoon series *King of the Hill* also made a reference to Hell Houses when Sally Field guest starred as a Christian who tried to make Halloween more appropriate by enforcing a town curfew and putting on a "Hallelujah House." So far, I have not read any research discussing how Hell Houses are used in *King of the Hill*, *Bones*, or *Law & Order: SVU*; my own interests has helped me find these, so this is by no means a comprehensive list of appearances of Hell Houses in popular culture. For further consideration, see the following: "Halloween," *King of the Hill* (television program), Episode no. 16, premiered 26 October 1997 by Fox, directed by John Rice and written by David Zuckerman; "Mummy in the Maze," *Bones* (television program), Episode no. 48, premiered 30 October 2007 by Fox, directed by Marita Grabiak and written by Scott Williams; and "Sin," *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (television program), Episode no. 178, premiered 27 March 2007 by NBC, directed by George Pattison and written by Patrick Harbinson.



identity politics. As noted, the body of Hell House research is limited; which is not to say the potential for the field itself is limited. Currently, while a number of papers have been delivered in academic conferences, there are only five peer-reviewed publications regarding Hell Houses: three articles, one dissertation, and one chapter in a dissertation. This body of work has successfully established foundational primers for exploring and understanding the content of Hell Houses. Such literature is helpful and necessary for the development of any academic field. This thesis seeks to contribute to the conversations initiated by scholars like John Fletcher, Brian Jackson, Lorraine Lipoma, Ann Pellegrini, and Hank Willenbrink. Because I rely and build on almost each of them throughout the thesis, I will forego a formal and thorough literature review here. However, I will briefly relate each of their particular contributions.

The three articles published in 2007 appeared in three very different journals: *Rhetoric Review*, *American Quarterly*, and *Theatre Survey*. Brian Jackson, as a rhetorician, unsurprisingly published in the first. In “Jonathan Edwards Goes to Hell (House): Fear Appeals in American Evangelism,” Jackson examined the similarities between the Early American Puritanical sermons of Edwards and the structure of Hell Houses. He found parallels between the psychosomatic impact of Edwards’ “fear appeals” and the rhetorical tactics employed currently when Hell Houses try to “scare the Hell out of people.” His article offers a close reading of the structure—and to some extent, the language—of a Hell House. As I am concerned with a performative analysis of the medium, Jackson’s article is certainly helpful but ultimately guided by a different methodology. Ann Pellegrini’s article in *American Quarterly* and John Fletcher’s in *Theatre Survey*, on the other hand, relate more to my own efforts to read and study Hell Houses as informed by and reflective of the faith-based communities creating them.

Pellegrini and Fletcher treat Hell Houses as sites indicative of other trends within both American Evangelical Christian communities, specifically, and American culture, generally. Pellegrini interviewed Pastor Keenan Roberts, analyzed the *Hell House* production by *Les Freres Corbusier*, and questioned academic assumptions that uncritically glorify and herald the potential of community-based theatre. Titling her article “‘Signaling Through the Flames’: Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feelings,” Pellegrini highlighted one of her arguments regarding the fact that Hell Houses are actually manifestations of Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. Furthermore, because the volunteers creating Hell Houses occasionally argue that their performances condemn sinful behaviors and not specific individuals, Pellegrini suggested Hell Houses literally embody a notion within mainstream Christian rhetoric referred to as “hating the sin, while loving the sinner.” She used Hell Houses to interrogate that otherwise unquestioned platitude.

Fletcher’s article also explores the dynamics of studying Hell Houses as a form of community-based theatre; however, his article explores the minutia of the Christian culture(s) creating Hell Houses. Where I draw theory regarding theatre and performance from Pellegrini, my attempt to define and explore Hell Houses as a medium for proselytization used specifically by Evangelical Christian communities stems from Fletcher. In “Tasteless as Hell: Community Performance, Distinction, and Countertaste in Hell Houses,” Fletcher not only asserted definitional differences between Evangelical and Fundamentalist questions, but he also explored the phenomenon of Hell Houses occurring within a much more dynamic trend of soft-sell evangelism and seeker churches. Fletcher claimed that the “tastelessness” of Hell Houses fits into a cultural necessity to generate distinction between those inside and those outside the Christian community. His article, while it by no means praised Hell Houses, argued that the act

of participating in the effort of producing community-based theatre creates both the space and potential for critical thought. These are not present in the structure of a seeker church service. Fletcher's essay critically engages with how the medium exists co-textually with other cultural forces and institutions. It also centers a lot on theorizing about the state of boundaries which define communities.

As far as the two dissertations are concerned, for this thesis, I drew less from them. Lorraine Lipoma's individual chapter fits into a larger project focused on detailing how American culture at large has depicted the devil humorously. She contends that in America, the devil has been cast as a "trickster" figure who, while menacing and evil, is also a harbinger of truth. Because the New Destiny Christian Center's outreach kits cast demons as guides who instruct audiences about behaviors which lead to damnation, the devil is paradoxically helpful. Ultimately, like Jackson's article, Lipoma's dissertation is concerned with reading the content of Hell Houses with a methodology and for a purpose which bear little resemblance to my own.

Conversely, my thesis is closer to resembling the vein of the work in Hank Willenbrink's dissertation. While his project is completely dedicated to describing Hell Houses, the main focus of his argument is concerned with asserting his theorized notion about a theological performative at work in Hell Houses. The "theological performative" concerns a communion between audience members and volunteers which I do not explore; however, Willenbrink does discuss the significance of creating a "reality" in Hell Houses and the role his theological performative plays in that element of Hell Houses. My thesis differs from Willenbrink's dissertation inasmuch as mine is more concerned with the significance of the mediums within Hell Houses rather than the medium of Hell Houses themselves. While Willenbrink's dissertation is a comprehensive treatment of Hell Houses and how they operate, my thesis is interested in utilizing Hell Houses

as an anchor to explore how discourses surrounding mediums of proselytization affect identity politics.

### **Hell Houses: A Tour of Homes**

In addition to familiarizing myself with the scholarship of other academics, I pursued my own research by conducting field work at three separate Hell Houses across the country. In this section, I will provide information regarding each of the productions, including their location, history, and church affiliation. Neither this chapter nor subsequent chapters will catalogue everything I saw at each Hell House or present experiences in each production in a sequential order. However, such information is often significant for informed readings of specific scenes. After attending each production, I created field notes by recording a dictation of my experience into a digital recorder. A transcription for each of the dictations can be found in separate appendices at the end of the thesis.

The first Hell House I attended was *Nightmare XVIII* hosted by Guts Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Every year Guts Church hosts *Nightmare* after it converts its Youth Recreation Building—a structure separate from but adjacent to its primary church building. The church's property sits right next to Interstate 44 from which a giant poster advertising the event can be seen on the side of their building. *Nightmare* lasts the entire month of October, operating every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. The doors opened at 6 PM and each night was planned to end around midnight. I traveled to Tulsa early in the month, attending on Friday, 08 October 2010 and Saturday, 09 October 2010. Of the three productions I visited, *Nightmare* was the only one I went to twice. It was, by far, the best attended, drawing large crowds on the first weekend which was still three weeks away from Halloween. From what I could tell, *Nightmare* also had the highest production values with impressive rotating sets, buckets of fake blood covering

volunteers as well as the walls, remarkable lighting designs, and a room that made for a very convincing swamp.

*Nightmare* followed the basic format discussed above; one noticeable distinction was that very few of the actors verbalized any lines. With other sounds, it was more advantageous to play a recording of the devil's voice that narrated over and commented on each scene. Finally, Guts Church provided a unique addition to the format. After visitors made it through *Nightmare* and were invited to pray with representatives of the church, they passed by a number of computers on the way to the exit. There, visitors were invited to share their experiences by recording a video that was automatically posted on YouTube. I will return to these videos more fully in Chapter Four in my discussion on the performance of Christian identities on the Internet.

My second Hell House trip occurred the weekend of Halloween, starting in Kansas City, Kansas and ending in Chandler, Arizona. In 2010, the Praise Chapel of Kansas City hosted its thirteenth production of *Hell Night*. The event happened on the Friday and Saturday evenings during the last two weeks of October. Praise Chapel does not own an adjacent building like Guts Church, so they actually converted their church building. *Hell Night* was set up more like a theatrical production as opposed to the general haunted house set-up. There was only one space of performance. The altar stage at the front of the church was converted into a stage that represented the Throne and Judgment Seat of God. Stage left of Heaven was Hell with demons and a zip line that lead to the other side of the church which was unfortunately only used once. Rather than walking through a series of rooms over the course of half an hour, audiences of *Hell Night* stay seated throughout the three hour production. It started with an introduction by the pastor, continued with a video prologue about a letter from a teenager in Hell because his Christian friend never told him about Jesus, and then ended its introduction with the depiction of

a nice young Christian man witnessing to drug dealers, prostitutes, and homeless people before dying in the middle of a gang battle.

*Hell Night* still depicted the themes typically touched on in a Hell House; however, the tropes were presented through specific characters like Nasty Tina, Floozy Suzy, and Gay Gary. There were ten such characters in addition to the nice young Christian man who died at the beginning of the show. He, incidentally, was the only one God found worthy of salvation; the other ten were condemned to Hell. Each character went through a highly codified set of events: (1) the character entered unaware that he or she had died; (2) the devil interrupted the character's interaction with the audience by throwing him or her into a ring of judgment before God's Throne; (3) the voice of God quoted scripture and then showed the character and the audience a video clip from the character's life; (4) the character's name was not found in the Book of Life so God condemned him or her to Hell; (5) the devil dragged the character into Hell; and (6) blood-curdling screams ensued. That sequence repeated ten times. The zip line as well as the full-body costumes for both the demons and the angels were impressive and memorable. *Hell Night's* use of filmed footage, theatrical rather than para-theatrical conventions, and named characters may differentiate it from what is generally considered the basic elements of a typical Hell House, but just because it does not look like Keenan Roberts' formula does not mean it's not a Hell House.

The morning after *Hell Night* in Kansas, I traveled to Chandler, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix. The Door Christian Center only had three performances: the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings of Halloween weekend. They also had converted part of their church building; however, it looked like the converted rooms were not part of the church used for worship services on Sunday. When I went on Saturday night, there were not many people there. Their

production was entitled *Final Destination V*, indicating it to be a relatively young project. Of the three Hell Houses, *Final Destination* most resembled the recommendations and scenes described in Pastor Roberts' kit. The only element that deviated from the format was the lack of a depiction of either Heaven or Christ on the cross. It ended with its depiction of Hell and then an invitation from church representatives to act on the Holy Spirit by confessing Christ.

Originally, my research plans intended to focus on the Hell Houses of the Intermountain West in order to resituate the conversation and challenge the basic assumptions that Hell Houses are a tradition solely of the US American South and Midwest. The Charles Redd Center for Western American Studies provided funding that allowed me to purchase the *Hell House Production Kit* from Pastor Roberts in Colorado and cover travel expenses to Arizona. I had intended to visit New Destiny Christian Center's *Hell House* in Thornton, Colorado; however, by corresponding with Pastor Roberts via email I learned that the 2010 production had to be cancelled due to an inability to procure a space in time. This necessitated a search for other options. To varying degrees and by various means I selected *Nightmare*, *Hell Night*, and *Final Destination* because I could find information on them through the Internet. I use information from the Hell House Production Kit as well as my own experiences at each of these productions to illustrate different elements of my argument regarding the discourse of neutrality employed to describe and legitimize certain mediums of proselytization.

### **A Demon Guide: The Scenes of This Thesis**

In this section, I will outline and preview the order of the material in the remaining chapters of this thesis. As stated above, I am interested in using the medium of Hell Houses as a way to focus on the dynamics of the discourse of neutrality surrounding three mediums of proselytization within Hell Houses: (1) the body; (2) verbal conversations and presentations of a

“real” self; and (3) the Internet. Furthermore, because proselytization heightens the necessity to establish the boundaries which define the community, I also explore the impact of using these mediums to perform and construct Christian identities within the community, outside the community, and in a space where both groups negotiate the process and the identity. Examining how each of these mediums operates within these specific spaces demonstrates how the presence and utilization of the discourse of neutrality legitimizes the use of particular mediums of proselytization. Additionally, each chapter interrogates the consequences of this legitimization in regards to its impact on the politics of faith-based communities and identities.

In Chapter Two, I explore how the use of the body in Hell Houses reveals that Evangelical Christians position the body as a neutral medium. Bodies—whether they belong to the volunteers participating in the presentation or to the audience members watching—are presumed to be tools or conduits in the process of a Hell House conversion. The structure of a Hell House indicates the belief that the body, as a medium of proselytization, can convey information from those within the community to those outside of the community. Bodies are used as a way for Evangelical Christians to perform their own identity to outsiders. In this chapter, I interrogate this assumption about the passivity of the body, arguing that reading the bodies as active or “in process” (rather than as stable mediums) reveals that they actually shape and create the meanings of the messages they convey while being shaped and created by the process of conveying the message.

Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz’s book *Volatile Bodies* to formulate a vocabulary and theoretical framework to discuss bodies, ultimately I aver that Hell Houses are spaces where Evangelical Christians construct bodies while also creating, defining, and performing a Christian identity. Ostensibly, this performance, as part of a drama ministry, is for outsiders; however,



when one considers that the majority of the audience participants already self-identify as Christians, the performance serves a function to the community itself other than outreach. Hell Houses provide the subcultural community with an internal generation and reification of an identity. Positing the body as a neutral medium masks the destabilized fluidity of identity. The construction of a stable, concrete way of knowing through the body legitimizes the construction of “reality” presented in Hell Houses as “how things really are.”

I pick up on this notion of “reality” in Chapter Three by examining how individuals outside the Evangelical Christian community perceive, characterize, and create what “Evangelical Christian” means as an identity. I explore this side of the discussion by interrogating the medium of proselytization via soft-sell conversation and presentations of a “real” self. Some Evangelical Christians criticize the tactics of Hell Houses and similar approaches as alienating and counterproductive to the divine imperative to take Christ’s gospel to all of the world: people won’t believe the message if they hate the messenger. In his article, John Fletcher talks about Hell Houses in relation to the rise of seeker churches that are more concerned with filling some type of life need than helping people realize they are going to Hell unless they accept Christ. In this chapter, I highlight that the medium of soft-sell conversations and presentations of self actually construct “how things really are” as much as Hell Houses do because they indicate an awareness of and sensitivity to how the performance of their identity is being read by outsiders.

Within the last decade, a number of books have been published within the Evangelical Christian community which have reexamined the politics, tactics, and results of certain proselytical approaches. Conducting close readings of such works like Jim Henderson’s *Evangelism without Additives: What if Sharing Your Faith Meant Just Being Yourself?* and

David Kinnaman's *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*, I read this trend of soft-sell evangelism against the backdrop of Hell Houses to explore this tension over the authority to determine authenticity. Kinnaman and Henderson argue that events like Hell Houses have created a bad image of Christianity which outsiders have come to believe and which needs to be redeemed. They claim the image of Christianity needs to be reclaimed through presenting things how they really are through individual experiences and conversations. I suggest this mode of evangelism is itself positioned as a neutral medium to convey truth and "how things really are" while doing so contributes to the creation of a reality that is ordered and constructed along those same lines. These new-paradigm evangelists may not employ fear tactics or emphasize the consequences of damnation like a Hell House, and Henderson and Kinnaman definitely find value in knowing specific individuals, but ultimately outsiders still sit within a framework of an other-ized identity Evangelical Christians are performing for and to.

In my next chapter, I turn to the Internet as a contested site of identity performance and creation where both those inside and those outside of the community generate representations of Christianity. While sometimes wary of the content available on the Internet, for a religious community interacting with a form of new media, Christians as a whole, but Evangelical Christians specifically, have embraced the medium with little resistance. In her book *When Religion Meets New Media*, Heidi Campbell suggests the community's historical relationships with previous forms of "new" media—like the printing press, radio, television, and film—facilitates the current rise of (what she and others have referred to as) "e-vangelism." Churches host websites which advertise events, broadcast sermons, and organize humanitarian efforts domestically and internationally.

The Internet also allows believers to enter a new space to conduct the work of proselytization. For example, I found or decided to attend the Hell Houses I did because they each had functioning websites that allowed me to confirm that there would actually be an event at the locations I traveled to. But Campbell also explores that the embrace is tempered by that wariness; part of the reason Christians need to participate in e-vangelism is to combat the work of the devil on the Internet. Campbell details that Christians engage in e-vangelism because they perceive and describe the Internet as if it were a passive conduit. Her work focuses on how engaging with the medium impacts and shapes the medium and the community. Here, I am more interested in exploring the dialogue between Christians and non-Christians that use the Internet to perform Christian identities while the space the dialogue occurs in happens within a medium perceived to be neutral or passive in the process of generating meaning.

In this chapter, I start with setting up a theoretical framework based on the work of Campbell and others to explore the creation of religious identities on the Internet and how Christians use the Internet. This provides an introduction to the work of e-vangelism, the discourses employed to support the use of the Internet as a proselytizing tool, and how Christian communities perform themselves through this new media. Then I look at a Christian parody website called the Landover Baptist Church to offer a sample of how an outsider utilizes the Internet to perform Christian identities as well. This particular website exaggerates and ridicules both Christians and their use of the Internet. Basically, in terms of identity politics, the Landover Baptist Church reflects an outsider's perception of Christianity, contributing to the generation, perpetuation, and proliferation of the negative identity concerning Kinnaman as discussed in Chapter Three. And among many other things, the website ridicules the practice of Hell Houses.

Finally, I make one final return to *Nightmare* to examine some of the YouTube videos made by the visitors which Guts Church posts indiscriminately online as testimonials of individuals' experiences. It is a unique feature and convergence of Hell Houses, new media, and identity performance which has not been discussed until now. Detailing this dialogue will reveal the dynamics of a community engaging with the boundaries of its identity. Furthermore, it demonstrates the community's struggle to negotiate its relation with and to a new media it utilizes to proselytize. The Internet, not unlike Hell Houses, reflects a promising and problematic space for proselytization and identity politics.

The final chapter concludes the thesis, revisiting this thesis's contribution to the field at large and considering new avenues of thought it has touched on but left unexplored. Here, I will discuss further the implications of recognizing how Evangelical Christians use the discourse of neutrality to conceptualize both their own and outsiders' use of various mediums. Understanding this modality of thinking provides more than a way of conjecturing about the motivations and behaviors of an American subculture. It outlines an epistemology underpinning the processes informing the creation and maintenance of American Christian communities and identities. As such, this thesis's discussion of the discourse of neutrality, mediums of proselytization, Hell Houses, and religious identities offers contemplation on the dynamics involved in the construction of "reality" and role mediums play in that process for believers and those outside such communities of belief.

## Chapter Two

### Inside The Body of Christ: (Per)forming Identities through Bodies in Hell Houses

Crossing through a fabricated nocturnal swamp inhabited by a pack of feral (and perhaps cannibalistic) boys, I passed an imposing, burly, middle-aged man in overalls on a wooden bridge. He looked like an extra from the film *Deliverance*. After reaching the other side of the bridge, our group ventured into the darkness. It was there that I entered the abyss of Hell. Or at least the Hell constructed by the Guts Church's *Nightmare XVIII* in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Enveloped in the pitch black, our group—which consisted of a dozen female tweens, five boys of comparable age, and me—boarded a metal carousel that began to slowly rotate. Now, I like to think of it as “the Carousel of Hell.” A basic railing outlined the perimeter of the platform. Metal chains surrounded the overall structure and formed a “ceiling” resembling a spider web. Soon spot lights revealed adolescents imprisoned in cages suspended above a haunting fog.

Eventually, there was enough light available for us to see the man (about six-and-a-half feet tall) standing in the center of our own metal cage. Bars contained him and separated him from our group. Demons resting above us on the web ceiling began to reach down through the gaps to touch the hair or brush the sides of the faces of spectators. Through all of this sensorial stimulation, an audio recording of the devil's voice played. Satan mocked our circumstances. Guts Church established this convention early in their *Nightmare* experience and maintained it throughout each of the vignettes. Each time, the voice gloated over his ability to deceive us, that we believed the lies he told us. In Hell, on the merry-go-round of terror and torture, the voice specifically reveled, “You believed all the lies I told you. You believed your body was who you

really were. And now you're mine . . . your body *and* your soul.”<sup>1</sup> The recording continued for a few more seconds; but when it stopped, the demons descended from above and the tall man representing Satan emerged from his center cage to chase us off the carousel.

We were chased into a room replicating an environment indicative of an Ultimate Fighting Championship cage with intense illumination, blaring music, and shouting crowds of young teenagers. At the center of the ring, a severely beaten and greatly bleeding Christ hunched over a stump while four shirtless men who looked like cover models from *Men's Health* magazine simulated brutal whip-based flogging. One man left the oddly homoerotic event long enough to approach me, screaming in my ear, “He did this for you!” The beating then resumed with strobe lights. Before we moved on, the crowds of adolescents emphatically shook the fences and the fighting cage they stood behind, shouting, “Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!” And so someone did as we saw in the next room where a crucifix rotated towards us to reveal a Christ so bloody that his entire body was scarred and red. After laboring arduously, if not futilely, to breathe—as evidenced by the time he spewed a mist of sweat and saliva towards us—Christ died. His body collapsed and our tour continued.

The body, perceptions of it and its role, occupies a paradoxical position in Hell Houses. On the one hand, the content sometimes suggests and other times didactically instructs that the world we perceive around us is a lie. Perceptions are faulty because they are experienced and understood through a body, a thing which people mistakenly identify as the root or core of their identity. On the other hand, the form of Hell Houses depends on a sensorial assault to effect a visceral reaction from and in spectators' bodies. Despite what *Nightmare's* devil may say, the tactics of a Hell House trust the ability of the physical bodies belonging to actors and spectators

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<sup>1</sup> This experience, as well as all others I had associated with Guts Church's Hell House is described and recorded in greater detail in the field notes I made after attending *Nightmare XVIII* on Friday, 08 October 2010, and Saturday, 09 October 2010. To see my notes in their entirety, see Appendix A.

to act as vehicles or conduits of God’s truth. The solution to this paradox between form and content rests in the binarized conceptualization regarding the physical body’s inherent neutrality and passivity.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between how bodies are perceived and how bodies perform in Hell Houses in order to detail how Evangelical Christians represent and create their own identity within their community. The form and content of Hell Houses reveal that, within the contemporary Evangelical communities producing Hell Houses, physical bodies are conceptualized as passive “vessels” or “conduits.” According to this paradigm, inherently neutral bodies are tools: either external cosmological forces like God and Satan animate bodies to do the work of good and evil *or* individuals perceive external stimuli from and communicate internal feelings and beliefs to the world through the instrumentality of the body. Either way, for Evangelical Christians, that good work or that communicated belief is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in both interpretations, the body only conveys, it does not impact or shape the message. In this chapter, I demonstrate that this discourse regarding the medium’s neutrality both reflects and creates a binarized conceptualization of reality.

However, I also indicate that when the body is read as a thing in process—rather than as a fixed or stable object—it becomes possible to see how the body contributes the creation of the “reality” of the paradigm. As the body creates reality, the body is created. The processes that shape or inform identities, communities, and realities occur simultaneously with the process that constructs bodies. In her book *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz conveys the complexity and importance of theorizing about this confluence of processes by employing the metaphor of a Möbius strip, the inverted three dimensional figure eight. She explains,

Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between these two alternatives. The Möbius strip has the advantage of showing the inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another.<sup>2</sup>

This interplay and convolution contest identity politics depending on a model where the body is theorized as one half of a duality complemented by the mind. Grosz's synthesis of and contributions to the theories regarding the body as a perpetual process rather than as a static instrument, vessel, or medium of expression are outlined more fully below. A full discussion of her synopses of these ideas and my articulation of how I use her work as a theoretical framework is the topic of the next section. For now, the introduction of her metaphor introduces my objective in this chapter to examine the role Hell Houses play in shaping (as well as reflecting) Evangelical Christian identities.

The body does not simply confirm the "truths" presented in Hell Houses; it creates that truth. Evangelical Christians expect bodies to behave like vessels or mediums which are passive in the creation of meaning and reality. I outline that expectation and then contrast that view against an examination of how bodies in Hell Houses do actively contribute to the generation of meaning and reality. When Evangelical Christians describe the body as a passive object, their discourse diminishes the role that physical bodies play in the operation of a Hell House. The description perpetuates a discourse of neutrality regarding a medium of proselytization. The body becomes a stable, concrete means or way of knowing. Ostensibly, a passive body can be

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, introduction to *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), xii. The quote continues, "This model also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychological interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside."



manipulated to purport the source of lies, but it can also be redeemed in order to reveal “how things really are.” The “reality” of Heaven and Hell, as presented in Hell Houses, is actually constructed through the performing, physical bodies. Devaluing the active role bodies play in creating that order of reality legitimizes the construction of “reality” as presented in Hell Houses. This legitimization masks the potential for the community’s identity to destabilize, shift, or be reordered.

Like any drama ministry, the declared purpose of a Hell House is outreach and proselytization; however, when one considers that the majority of the audience participants already self-identify as Christians, the performance serves a function to the community itself other than outreach. Hell Houses provide the Evangelical Christian community with an internal generation and reification of an identity. After establishing the theoretical framework informing this chapter, I outline how Hell Houses speak to an Evangelical community as much as they come from one. This facilitates my objective in this chapter to explore how individuals within the community use their bodies to (per)form their own identities as members of the community to members of the community. Hell Houses are spaces where Evangelical Christians construct bodies while also creating, defining, and performing a Christian identity. With the framework and the “audience” reconsidered, I characterize the shape of that identity by examining moments of resistance—moments when bodies constitute “reality” and meaning in a way that defies the politics of the Hell House. Such moments include physical reactions like vomiting or becoming sexually aroused. Ultimately, this “Christian” identity is characterized as communal, knowledgeable or aware of “how things really are,” responsible (in terms of spreading the gospel), and patriarchal. While the body certainly contributes to the creation of the order of

things, framing the body as passive legitimizes the “truthfulness” and “reality” of this shared identity for the community.

### **Body Theory: Vessel, Medium, or Process**

The significance of the body in Hell Houses and how they are framed are topics which have been discussed in previous scholarship; however, scholars have not yet theorized what or how bodies experience Hell Houses. In this section, I briefly review the academic thoughts regarding bodies in Hell Houses and establish my own theoretical framework based on Elizabeth Grosz’s work. Analyzing the rhetoric of Hell Houses, Brian Jackson argues that Hell Houses present “the awfulness of Hell psychosomatically—in the body and the mind.”<sup>3</sup> He draws comparisons between tactics in Hell Houses and fear appeals in Jonathan Edwards’s sermons, suggesting contemporary Evangelical Christians are replicating Edwards’s efforts to “force sensations and the ideas annexed to them into men’s minds through the only channel ideas can be conveyed to them, through the senses.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in her article “Signaling Through the Flames,” Ann Pellegrini points out that Hell Houses represent a compelling and surprising fulfillment of Antonin Atraud’s theories regarding a “theatre of cruelty.” She writes,

Artaud’s theatre of cruelty privileges feeling over plot and moves to break down artificial walls between spectator and spectacle by bombarding the audience from all sides with new sensations. This is theater as affective immersion and communal event, and its “therapeutics” are not gentle pats on the back.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Jackson, “Jonathan Edwards Goes to Hell (House): Fear Appeals in American Evangelism,” *Rhetoric Review*, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Pellegrini, “‘Signaling Through the Flames’: Hell Houses Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling,” *American Quarterly*, 926.

Between the swamp, carousel, cage fight, and crucifixion alone, the *Nightmare* at Guts Church certainly “bombarded its audience from all sides with new sensations.” And like Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, Hell Houses over-stimulate the senses to facilitate a vision of a true reality that is not perceivable or knowable by secular standards or ways of knowing. At each Hell House I attended, spectators and participants voiced their amazement with each performance’s ability to capture “how things really are.” Such an accomplishment necessitates the not-so gentle pats on the back given in *Nightmare*—figuratively in terms of the audience and literally in terms of the volunteer playing Christ. Hell Houses need bodies: those of performers and spectators. Exploring and employing a theoretical framework to investigate the nature and function of those bodies can contribute to a differentiation between how Evangelical Christians perceive Hell House bodies and how those bodies can be read critically.

In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz summarizes four ways in which the body has currently been discussed: (1) biologically or scientifically, (2) as a vessel, (3) as a medium, or (4) as a process. First, the body may be regarded as an object in terms set by the discourses of natural and biological sciences. Here, “the body is understood in terms of organic and instrumental functioning.”<sup>6</sup> This line of thinking, ultimately, fails to address the role interiority plays in the formation of either the psychological viewpoint or the body itself.<sup>7</sup> For me, when discussing the body in terms of spiritual beliefs and religious identities, this oversight is problematic. The other two theories, however, do address the role of the interior psyche, viewing the body as a static frame.

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> An example of the limitations of this theory would be its inability to adequately explain the phantom limb phenomenon in which an amputee continues to perceive sensual reception in a limb he or she no longer has. An interior-based body image still informs the constitution and perception of the exterior circumstances.

Thus, the second line of thinking has described the body as a vessel and the third as a medium. According to the vessel approach, the body can be “occupied by an animating, willful subjectivity.”<sup>8</sup> However, this very notion of “occupation” contributes to a description of the body as a passive object. The body’s “inhabitant” may struggle with “others/exploiters.” As Grosz explains, this view suggests, “Whatever agency or will it [the body] has is the direct consequences of the animating, psychological intentions. Its inertia means that it is capable of being acted on, coerced, or constrained by external forces.”<sup>9</sup> This argument is at the heart of Hell Houses and how Evangelical Christians perceive the body. According to this model, either Christ or Satan can act as the animating will constraining and coercing a body either to salvation or damnation. Either way, the body as a vessel is a tool or instrument requiring “discipline and training [. . .] subduing and occupation.”<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, when the body is considered as a signifying medium, along the third line of Grosz’s body theory, it is a two-way conduit. Here, the interiority of an individual’s psyche is a closed system. The body is the means by which a subject receives and processes sensorial experiences; however, the body is also the means by which a subject expresses his or her private beliefs, ideas, thoughts, or feelings. Grosz critiques, “Underlying this view too is a belief in the fundamental passivity and transparency of the body.”<sup>11</sup> The body only bears messages—either those of an exterior world or those of the interior psyche. This model perfectly conveys the sentiments present in the production of a Hell House: Evangelical Christians believe that bodies of the converted, the actors, can be used to effectively signify beliefs like sin and Hell because their interior psyche is comprised of a knowledge or awareness of how things really are.

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Internally, a Christian perceives their faith and conviction in their perception of reality as an understanding which can be shared and communicated. In Hell Houses, Christians use their bodies to relate that message and understanding. Furthermore, Hell Houses can spread the gospel by conveying Christ's messages to the bodies of the spectators "through the only channel ideas can be conveyed to them, through the senses."

Producers and advocates of Hell Houses posit the body along this line of thought. Though Evangelical Christians might perceive themselves as animated by God's spirit or force when participating in the efforts of a Hell House or that the point is to animate others with that same spirit, Evangelical Christians are defined by a belief that they are to influence the world. That belief coincides with the positionality of the subject's body as a passive medium situated between an internal psyche (or within the Christian community) and an external world (or the community of outsiders and non-believers). By a divine charge, Evangelical Christians must interact with others, perceive a world outside their community and communicate the necessity of bringing individuals or groups in that space into the community. Exploring how Hell Houses position bodies reveals that Evangelical Christians perceive bodies to be the type of medium described by this third line of thinking.

Unfortunately, this theory ultimately ignores moments when bodies—of actors or spectators—resist what can be referred to as the apparatus or "hermeneutic systems of discursive control."<sup>12</sup> Grosz explains that if a subject wishes to gain knowledge, make itself understood by others, or be effective in a world, "the body must be seen as an unresistant pliability which

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<sup>12</sup> This phrase comes from Jayna Brown's book *Babylon Girls* and her use of Elizabeth Grosz's book. For a fascinating discussion of the body as process in regards to the black female performers at the turn of the twentieth century (especially performances of the character Topsy), see Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women and the Shaping of the Modern* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), 56–91.

minimally distorts information, or at least distorts in a systematic and comprehensible fashion.”<sup>13</sup>

A hermeneutic system of discursive control dictates how much a body can distort information while still rendering it comprehensible. It controls the degree to which a physical body can contribute to the generation of meaning. The problem with this theory is that it does not take into account resistance; it assumes an unresistant pliability that bodies will at times defy. These are moments when the body performs an active, constitutive role. Grosz’s fourth line of investigation provides the theoretical framework necessary to address these questions and reveal the implications of identities based on a perception of the body as a passive medium.

While the vessel and the medium lines of thought facilitate a conversation based on how Evangelical Christians conceptualize the body, Elizabeth Grosz’s fourth summarization of theory helps address unintentional meanings and identities self-generated by Evangelical Christians. Such events, like the moment of arousal mentioned above, occur in moments of resistance when the body produces complexity due to its activity, constitutive capability, and historical particularity. Grosz explains that the body is “productive and creative [and] cannot be definitely known since it is not identical with itself across time. The body does not have a ‘truth’ or a ‘true nature’ since it is a process and its meanings and capacity will vary according to its context.”<sup>14</sup>

This reconceptualization challenges the ahistorical nature of the body. Historical moments shape and are shaped by the body; the meaning of the body or a body constantly changes. Moreover, this provides a compelling framework to discuss moments of “resistance.” When the body is a process, an authentic reality or true identity within the body cannot be restored or recovered. It does not exist. However, “resistance,” as mentioned in the preceding paragraph, can and does still occur—as we will see in *Hell Houses*. And sexual arousal is not the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 12.

only moment of resistance in Hell Houses. Many patrons cry and some vomit in response to the images and experience. One of the Hell Houses I went to keeps a record online tracking the physical, visceral reactions guests have at their attraction. They update it each year. Physical responses to the Hell House are significant. In fact, crying, puking, and even sexual arousal—though each might seem counterproductive to any process of conversion—actually facilitate or constitute the conversion. These responses do not necessarily resist the aims of the Hell House; but they do resist the framing of the body as a passive medium imposed by the discourse of neutrality. Because the body is a process, the dynamics, implications, and consequences of such moments reconsider the process of “resistance” in identity politics as more complicated than generally defined.

### **Hell House: A Home for the Community**

The moments of resistance in Hell Houses—like vomiting, crying, and becoming sexually aroused, which are discussed in the next sections—are significant when Hell Houses are re-contextualized not simply as mediums of proselytization but rather as events of community formation. In this section, I explain how Hell Houses speak to an Evangelical community as much as they come from one to highlight how Hell Houses constitute a space where Evangelical Christians represent and create their identity by performing that identity. The stated purpose of a Hell House is outreach. That objective does shape the dramaturgy of the performances. However, the majority of Hell House attendees already consider themselves Christians. As John Fletcher notes,

Though no comprehensive studies on Hell House efficacy yet exist, [research suggests that in terms of attendance and conversion] the people who simply watch the show and leave substantially outnumber those who choose to convert [. . .] Furthermore, many of

the conversions reported by larger Hell House productions turn out in fact to be ‘recommitments’ by backsliding Christians rather than first-time decisions of brand-new converts.”<sup>15</sup>

Fletcher suggests the way Evangelical Christians conflate the terms “recommitments” and “initial conversions” in their use to measure the efficacy of their outreach efforts indicates compelling theological implications. One implication includes beliefs regarding impermanent grace. However, the conflation, recognizing “recommitments” on a salvation par with “initial conversions,” also illustrates the weight and significance of reification in the process of Hell House performance. Hell Houses are not only considered “successful” because they introduce the unconverted to that paradigm. Hell Houses also reinscribe a Christian identity and worldview for the believers involved while re-integrating backsliding Christians back into the community.

*Hell Night* at the Praise Chapel in Kansas City, Kansas represented the most concentrated community-based dramaturgy.<sup>16</sup> The event, in many areas, either presupposed or relied on membership within the community—not just a general Evangelical community, but specifically a Praise Chapel community. In one of its eleven Trial of Heaven scenarios (as described in Chapter One), *Hell Night* presented the audience with the character “Gay Gary.”<sup>17</sup> Interrogating Gary about his alternative lifestyle, the Throne of God showed Gary a video of his life. The format of the recording parodied a homosexual reality television show that combined the casual living arrangements of *The Real World* with the cutthroat competitive elements of *Survivor*. The video

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<sup>15</sup> John Fletcher, “Tasteless as Hell: Community Performance, Distinction, and Countertaste in Hell House,” *Theatre Survey*, 318.

<sup>16</sup> John Fletcher suggests that Hell Houses’ emphasis on outreach qualifies it as an “activist, community-based performance.” Recognizing the difficulty in concretely defining community-based performance, Fletcher continues, “Hell House productions, though based on a core scenario, encourage and rely upon a great deal of community-specific adaptation and dramaturgy.” See *Ibid.*, 316 and 330.

<sup>17</sup> This experience, as well as all others I had associated with Praise Chapel’s Hell House is described and recorded in greater detail in the field notes I made after attending *Hell Night* on Friday, 29 October 2010. To see my notes in their entirety, see Appendix B.



revealed that Gary's housemates voted him out. The stereotypical and "comical" depiction of a gay man as highly flamboyant generated quite a bit of laughter. Yet, the event which sparked an even greater response from the audience was the title sequence of the parodistic show depicting Gary's housemates.

The audience erupted with hysterical laughter over seeing four husky men participating in effeminate activities—like shopping for clothes, baking with a frilly apron on, or reading a tabloid. Each of these men were middle-aged, overweight, and of significant stature. The humor resulted not simply from the juxtaposition between masculine-appearing men participating in effeminate activities. It stemmed from a discontinuity between a familiarity with the men in the video and their performance in the video. The audience—a congregation—laughed at the discrepancy generated between the parishioner everyone knew as a member of their church community and the representation of an exaggerated homosexuality which seemed so antithetical to the nature of that individual and his body. The Gay Gary scenario did not operate (at least not primarily) as an effort of outreach, warning the unconverted outside the community of Evangelical Christians about the eternal consequences of homosexuality. The performance served to reflect and create the heteronormative beliefs preexisting within the community of Praise Chapel congregants.

*Hell Night's* treatment of the abortion scenario also evidenced the perceived insularity of the production. An adolescent girl named Nasty Tina quickly shed a pretense of innocence for a flair for promiscuity, resulting in pregnancy. Upon advice from her mother, Tina hid the pregnancy and took an abortion pill. Violent vomiting and vaginal bleeding (again, depicted through a film projected on the screen) followed, as well as the young girl's death and subsequent damnation. Certainly, the proceedings condemned sexual promiscuity and abortion;

however, both the film of Tina's life and the sermonized "talk-back" at the end of the production by Pastor Kelly Lohrke highlighted the actions of Tina's mother more than anything else. Pastor Lohrke explained that as terrible as abortions are, a major problem in the issue of teenage pregnancy is that parents—parents who call themselves Christians—are encouraging or requiring their pregnant teenagers to have an abortion. Implicating the mother not only as guilty of sin but also as representative of a trend within the community, Lohrke and *Hell Night* did not present the consequences of abortion as a means of outreach and explanation to unconverted Christians. Instead, the condemnation of the behavior was focused internally, addressing the politics and beliefs of the community self-reflexively. Demarcating the parameters of appropriate Christian behavior, boundaries are literally drawn by and on the bodies of believers—those in the performance and in the audience.

These examples from *Nightmare* and *Hell Night* are not indicative of an attempt to re-contextualize Hell Houses in such a way that their didactic methodologies and proselytical intentions are ignored. Hell Houses are instruments of outreach: a means for members of a community to communicate ideas to individuals outside that community. However, positioning Hell Houses as a space of both community performance and creation resituates Hell Houses as sites where Evangelical Christians generate and negotiate the dynamics and politics of an Evangelical identity—an identity characterized by communality.

### **Puking Patron: Passivity, Vessel-ability, and Patriarchy in a Hell House Patron's Body**

With Hell Houses reconsidered as a performance for those already belonging to the community and a theoretical framework regarding bodies established, I will examine how the aesthetics and methodologies of Hell Houses construct the bodies of participants as "Christian." This section focuses on the bodies of audience members; the bodies of the actors are discussed in

the next section. Hell Houses use bodies as a medium of proselytization because they believe bodies are passive and stable objects; however, bodies are active and constitutive of beliefs and reality. Reading the bodies of patrons along both lines of thought indicates the dynamics of bodies in Hell Houses both representing and creating characteristics of a “Christian” identity.

Most journalistic reporting—whether it is local or national and through print, television, or new media—regarding Hell Houses has tended to focus on the content of Hell Houses. Reporters have placed an emphasis on the material performed. The depictions of behavior categorized as “sinful” have eclipsed the means by which the statement and beliefs are conveyed. Those means by which Hell Houses function reveal perceptions of the body as a vessel or as a medium. However, those same methodologies also actively constitute Evangelical Christian bodies—and by association Evangelical Christian identities—that are passive to animating, external forces, like God, the devil, and the phenomenological stimuli in Hell Houses. The form and structure of Hell Houses choreograph a patriarchal and psychosomatic experience for audience members—most of which already belong to the community—who not only perceive the content but also internalize the form in their very bodies.

Of the three Hell Houses I attended, nowhere was the acknowledgement of the significance of the audience member’s body more evident than at The Door Christian Center’s *Final Destination* in Chandler, Arizona. On the operating website for their Hell House (Hell101.com), The Door Christian Center posts statistics cataloguing and archiving audience reactions from each year’s event. *Final Destination* is a comparatively younger Hell House. The performance I attended in 2010 was its fifth venture. So, the collected data only goes back to 2006. That said, what information has been collected, while limited, is significant. The website explains,

At Hell101.com we keep a tongue-in-cheek record of the experiences of our customers. This is done to give us a better understanding of how effective our event is. It also tells you, the guest that we do an excellent job of scaring the Hell out of people!!<sup>18</sup>

The use of the terms “tongue-in-cheek” and “customers” are compelling in their own right; however, the significance I am interested in is how the statistics are perceived and presented as a means to communicate the efficacy of the performance. These statistics are quite simplistic; in fact, they are not much beyond tally marks for different categories. The striking element regarding the data is that almost every category of responses measures a physical reaction (See Figure 2.1). Each year, members of The Door Christian Center count (among other responses) how many people cry, puke, faint, or fall into a fetal position.<sup>19</sup> Although 2010 broke records for patrons who fell into fetal positions (with eight far surpassing the four previous years’ cumulative five), as a whole *Final Destination V* reflected a drastic decrease in each of the other categories. Unlike Praise Chapel’s *Hell Night* or Guts Church’s *Nightmare*, the Door Christian Center’s *Final Destination* only ran for three nights on one weekend. If the audience attendance for Friday and Sunday evening in any way resembled the size of the crowd on the Saturday night I went, the statistics do not reflect any shift in aesthetic choices or production effects from previous years. Instead, it looks like there was simply a smaller turnout in 2010.

In fact, an experience I had at *Final Destination* with those aesthetics—specifically in their abortion scene—illustrates the implications of this data and what it reveals about the role of an audience member’s body in the space of a Hell House. To be candid and blunt, I nearly

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<sup>18</sup> “Hell House Fear Statistics,” *Hell101.com*, accessed 09 Jan 2011, [http://hell101.com/-06\\_\\_\\_\\_07\\_Statistics.html](http://hell101.com/-06____07_Statistics.html).

<sup>19</sup> People who either “quit” (presumably patrons who have already paid for a ticket but abandon the line out of fear) or are characterized as “Screaming Mad” are also counted. I am not entirely certain what “Screaming Mad” means but my guess is that it represents the occurrences when a “customer” vehemently and/or passionately confronts members of the church about the unethical and arguably unchristian dynamics or perspectives of the Hell House.

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
165 Criers	245 Criers	288 Criers	250 Criers	50 Criers
2 Pukers	1 Puker	2 Pukers	0 Pukers	0 Punksers [sic]
6+ Quit	19 Quit	55 Quit	21 Quit	5 Quit
2 Fainters	3 Fainters	1 Faint	0 Fainters	0 Fainters
1 Went Fetal	1 Fetal	0 Fetal	3 Fetals	8 Fetals
1 Wild Mom	28 Mad!	31 Mad!	29 Mad!	11 Mad!

**Figure 2.1.** “Fear Statistics Hell House.” A chart from Hell101.com that indicates types of reactions (and their frequency) that guests of *Final Destination* have had over the last five years while at the event.

vomited.<sup>20</sup> A number of circumstances external to Hell House aesthetics contributed to my queasiness. It was in Arizona and I was dehydrated. It did not help that The Door Christian Center converted their church building for the occasion by lining all of the walls with black plastic bags, making the rooms incredibly dark but also stuffy. Furthermore, I had not eaten for a few hours; so when I won a bag of popcorn for answering a trivia question while standing in line, I scarfed it down voraciously without considering the consequences. When it came time to join four other patrons into a small room where a teenage girl writhed in pain while her doctor proceeded to pull hamburger meat out from under a sheet covering the girl before throwing it at our feet, I personally was already in a state predisposed to throwing up. However, the content that followed certainly encouraged that particular reaction. After the attending nurse tossed the leftover fetus into a garbage can but before we descended a staircase into Hell, we watched a video in the artificial operating room. The video combined footage from Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* with images of aborted embryos and fetuses at various chronological stages of development. Ostensibly, depictions of the brutality against Christ were conflated with representations of the mass, visceral violence committed against comparably innocent children

<sup>20</sup> This experience, as well as all others I had associated with The Door Christian Center’s Hell House is described and recorded in greater detail in the field notes I made after attending *Final Destination V* on Saturday, 30 October 2010. To see my notes in their entirety, see Appendix C.

throughout the country. It did make me want to puke. Yet, I concentrated very hard on trying not to do so because—in a wonderfully self-aware, performative way—I did not want The Door Christian Center to think they had a significant impact on me. I did not want to become a statistic.

The intent of a Hell House is to purge the animating will of the devil (or “scare the Hell”) out of people. At that point, God’s spirit can enter the emptied body, filling the vessel with a holy animating force. Though arguably a marginal statistic, counting how many people vomit is a way that the church measures the efficacy of its performance and is indicative of the meanings associated with Hell House’s psychosomatic aesthetics. Puking and crying constitute the first two categories listed in Hell101.com’s statistics, despite the fact that they represent (respectively) the least and most likely physical reactions among guests at *Final Destination*. But both responses mirror the intent and signify the success of a Hell House experience: both are acts of purgation. However, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, each action indicates (or is coded to indicate) very different processes occurring within and shaping ideas about the body:

Blood, vomit, saliva, phlegm, pus, sweat, tears, menstrual blood, seminal fluids [. . .]

There is a kind of hierarchy of propriety governing these fluids themselves. Those which function with clarity, unclouded by the specter of infection, can be represented as cleansing and purifying: tears carry with them none of the disgust associated with the cloudiness of pus, the chunkiness of vomit, the stickiness of menstrual blood. Acquiring a social representation as a clean fluid, as waterlike, transparent, purifying, tears take on a different psychological and sociological status than the polluting fluids that dirty the body.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 195.

Creating a space that uses theatrical aesthetics to bombard the senses of an audience member to the point that the spectator vomits establishes an association between the behavior depicted as “sinful” and the embodied response that requires the expulsion of pollution. The space of the abortion room is organized in such a way that the psychosomatic response is designed to be an expulsion of dirty rather than clear fluids.

Unlike the other Hell Houses I visited, *Final Destination* forewent the typical transcendence usually associated with the final image or scenario of Christ on the cross. Rather than embodied, he was mediated. Rather than triumphant through sacrifice, he was sharing screen time with aborted fetuses. The final escape from Hell and subsequent conversation with Christian representatives later produces the space for clean, tearful purgation; but in the room directly preceding the descent into Hell, the semiotics of the performance solicit dirty, chunky vomiting. When this happens, not only is there a physical manifestation that the pollution of the devil has been expelled, but there is also a link produced in the audience member’s body between the “disgusting” fluid and the act of abortion. The physical body of the spectator contributes to the identification of abortion as sinful and antithetical to a Christian identity. This acts as the means of creating the knowledge and awareness of sinful behavior how it really is and so that identity is characterized by a community-based definition of knowledgeable.

These dynamics reveal that the Evangelical Christians producing Hell Houses perceive the body as a vessel, occupied by an individual’s soul and the animating force of either God or the devil. The body is not unlike the format of various permutations of contemporary Christian entertainment. In discussing the paradoxical popularity of Christian Rock among a subculture notorious for condemning the satanic origins of rock music, Philip Anderson describes Christian

Rock as a “sheep in wolf’s clothing.”<sup>22</sup> Basically, Anderson argues that rock music was vilified for the hidden messages—the words—embedded within the lyrics or the subliminal recordings. The *form* of rock music was inert, an empty vessel. Christian Rock takes the form of rock music but infuses it with holy content, quite literally *the* Word. Hell Houses reappropriate haunted houses as a neutral medium of entertainment in similar ways. The content, not the structure, is suspect and transmutable. In the same way, the body itself is a passive object which can be filled diametrically with either the spirit of the devil or the spirit of God.

This could explain why the rhetoric of Hell Houses are so preoccupied with instructing spectators to resist permitting a variant of substances into their bodies: drugs, alcohol, bullets from guns (in the case of suicide), or penises (whether this is addressing teenage pregnancy or homosexuality). When Hell House guests have Hell scared out of them, there is room to either take or accept God’s spirit into them, into their passive body vessel. Only then, can God work through them as an instrument. Hell Houses reflect and create a theological identity for Evangelical Christians which is fundamentally passive, patriarchal, and heteronormative, in seemingly inescapable ways.

### **Moments of Resistance, Body as Process, and Performing Sin**

Hell Houses frame guests as passive by framing their bodies as passive; however, as a performative means of outreach and salvation, Hell Houses depend on and create assertive and active Christian identities. This section initially recognizes moments Hell House overtly prompt action and participation within audience members to effect active Christian identities; however, it quickly moves into an analysis of moments of resistance within the bodies of both audience members and actors, though a greater emphasis is placed on the latter of the two. In moments of

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<sup>22</sup> Philip M. Anderson, “The Stillborn Twin: The Christian Lifestyle Beats with the Heart of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *Christotainment: Selling Jesus through Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 209.



resistance, the body defies the hermeneutic system of discursive control by contributing to generation and constitution of meaning and reality. Building on Ann Pellegrini's line of thinking that the medium of theatre can queer the heteronormative point of a Hell House message, I investigate how heterosexual physical arousal can also queer the heteronormative and patriarchal sexual politics within Hell House polemics. Sexual arousal would contribute to the meaning of a Hell House experience; the body plays a far more active role than Evangelical Christians anticipate. However, such moments of resistance do not necessarily threaten a Christian identity—just the modality by which they are made.

At the end of the Hell House experience, audience members receive instruction regarding the active and assertive state of a Christian identity when representatives of the church invite attendees to pray with them. Brian Jackson recognizes this as “a unique variation of the traditional evangelical altar call.”<sup>23</sup> Each Hell House I attended framed this encounter differently (the one in Kansas City literally happened at the altar of the church), but the variations still suggested a fairly codified procedure. Representatives would ask audience members a question (generally rhetorical) about their experience and what they saw in Hell House; then, they would ask if any of the guests could feel God's spirit or a desire to commit to Christ. An affirmative response was usually to be indicated by raising a hand. At that point, guests were invited into another room or to the front before the altar to pray with congregants for salvation. Willingness to participate in the altar call and to accept God's saving spirit into one's vessel must be signified by some physical action.

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<sup>23</sup> Brian Jackson, “Jonathan Edwards Goes to Hell (House),” 55. In the fourth chapter of his dissertation, Robert Henry Willenbrink discusses this exchange at length, theorizing the moment to a “theological performative.” See Robert Henry Willenbrink, “Scaring the Jesus into You: American Hell Houses in Performance” (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2009).

While The Door Christian Center may keep track of physical reactions like puking or fainting, and though those reactions do shape the dynamics of a Christian identity, an audience member in the space of a Hell House must perform an action that signifies (and perhaps creates) recognition of God's spirit in order to assume that Christian identity. Being in the space of a Hell House indicates that part of being Christian, or part of having a Christian identity, is participating in evangelical activities—like putting on a Hell House. Raising the hand or walking towards the altar embodies an acceptance to become an instrument of God in order to help others raise a hand or walk towards the altar. In this moment, the body of the participant and the Christian identity he or she is performing and creating is paradoxically active and passive simultaneously: passive because God's force or Spirit is animating them—directing or encouraging them to raise their hand or walk—and active because they are performing that action and choosing to accept or receive that animating will.

The physicality of this ritualized performance and the identity associated with it can be discussed in terms of the body as a medium or as a process. Arguably, the act of raising a hand materializes and externally communicates an internal transformation or recognition. A similar statement could be said for anyone participating in the Hell House as an actor, church representative, or security guard. They are each using their bodies to convey an internal understanding of how the world really is. However, while this notion may be helpful, it ignores moments of resistance where bodies disrupt and destabilize the narratives established by the rhetoric of Hell Houses. This is not to suggest that Hell Houses impose an inauthentic Christian identity onto the stable or static bodies of the performers and guests. The disruptions and moments of resistance do not threaten the Christian identity. Instead, the moments of

destabilization engender, shape, and self-verify the validity of the Christian identities performed by and for the Christians participating in the Hell House.

Examining the instances where these moments of disruption can and do occur reveals the dynamics of the identity politics operating in Hell Houses. Such moments of resistance could include the highly homoerotic staging of Christ's beating in *Nightmare*, Nasty Tina's striptease in *Hell Night*, or even a puking patron in *Final Destination*. Guts Church permitted patrons to make YouTube videos describing their experience in the *Nightmare*; one adolescent male described the beating scene as something that would be enjoyable for those who have a fetish for "that sort of thing."<sup>24</sup> In another YouTube video, a female adolescent name Mariah talked about the sexy men beating up Jesus. She admonished listeners that no matter how much they might want to touch the sexy men covered in blood in the whipping room they should not. She then showed the fake blood that was on her hand.<sup>25</sup> Both teenagers read the scene—the scene about Christ's sacrifice and pain for their salvation—sexually. The young man was joking (as I admittedly was with my comments at the beginning of this chapter), but for audience members sexually aroused by the homoerotic sadism presented in the whipping room, their arousal might constitute a form of resistance counteracting the other patriarchal and heteronormative politics at work in the Hell House. This is possible with Nasty Tina's striptease as well. The medium that is designed to dissuade a promiscuous sexuality can encourage or generate an interest in that very modality of sexuality. The puking patron may not read their own experience as a purgation of cleansing. Instead, the experience could end up associating the bitter taste of bile with the

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<sup>24</sup> "NightmareTulsa's webcam video October 31, 2010, 05:26 PM," YouTube video, accessed 03 March 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/user/NightmareTulsa#p/u/17/Z3A3W\\_6Fh60](http://www.youtube.com/user/NightmareTulsa#p/u/17/Z3A3W_6Fh60), posted 31 October 2010.

<sup>25</sup> "nightmare chanin mariah and mack," YouTube video, accessed 03 March 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/user/NightmareTulsa#p/u/6/u9HOh9omnqQ>, posted 31 October 2010.

message of Christianity presented. The physical body will participate in the creation of meaning, but it will not necessarily create the meanings intended by those producing the Hell House.

For this discussion, I would prefer to look at one final scene from *Nightmare*: the date rape scene. Leaving a house and family decimated by a drunk teenage driver who ran his car into a living room, our group passed through a narrow hall of dorm room doors. A few demons and fairly obese, shirtless men emerged from the doors as we made our way to a space designed to teach everyone (meaning the young girls) about the dangers of date rape drugs.<sup>26</sup> The scene presented three actors: a young dazed girl lying in bed with seemingly nothing on but the bed sheet covering her, an inebriated college-aged man who stumbled towards the audience as he took off his shoes and pants, and a friend sitting in a computer chair across from the bed recording the event on a camera. Satan's automated voice said something about the girl not knowing what was in the drink the man gave her. Also, the devil insinuated that the girl would probably have an abortion based on a decision that she would be making in nine months. At that point, the college-aged man not only climbed on top of the girl but also pulled the sheet up around her legs and started reaching his hand underneath the sheet. In that scenario, *Nightmare*—perhaps unwittingly—positioned the audience so we would relate to the girl's powerlessness to stop the situation, the friend's voyeuristic predilections, and (in a way) both simultaneously.

The performers used their bodies to engage in a surprisingly eroticized representation of rape. The structure of the content condemned the girl's carelessness and the man's predatorial actions; however, the condemnation against the pornographic voyeurism embodied by the third performer functioned more ambivalently. To reveal the exploitation of sexuality by representing a man filming a sexual act, *Nightmare* had to simulate a sexual act. That simulation situates the

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<sup>26</sup> It may have just been me, but there was actually little to indicate that the reason the girl was having sex was because she had been drugged. My familiarity with the convention and the scenario framed the actions and instructional purpose of the scene far more than the recording of Satan's gloating voice I could barely hear.

bodies performing and the bodies perceiving the act—be it the third performer or the guests in the audience—within a liminal space that both condemns and satiates the sinful behavior. This ambivalence highlights a compelling attribute of Hell Houses: they are spaces where Christian identities are performed and created through the representation of antithetical behaviors and identities.

Or at least, the behaviors are presumed to be a depiction of antithetical behavior. Ann Pellegrini suggests that it is possible that the medium of theatre queers the message of Hell Houses. Considering the ethical implications of presenting antihomosexual sentiments to youth, she contends,

The uptake of a message is not fully determined by the sender's intentions. Misfires happen all the time, especially when it comes to sexual representations. Can we rule out the possibility that for some young people—GLBT, questioning, or otherwise—just getting a glimpse of same-sex eroticism is a perverse pleasure, revealing possibilities they were not otherwise supposed to contemplate? In other words, what if the very medium Hell House uses to reach its audience, theater, queers the pitch of the message?<sup>27</sup>

The eroticism of a vilified heterosexual act can be discussed in similar terms. For Pellegrini, the medium of theatre offers a resistance, destabilizing the antihomosexual rhetoric to the point that the message is fractured. Perhaps GLBT youth can escape a Hell House unscathed because the representation conveys a different message to the adolescents than damnation. In *Nightmare's* date rape scene, I suggest that the hetero-eroticism also queers the pitch of the intended message. But while it destabilizes the message of the Hell House which condemns promiscuity, voyeurism, and rape, it also invariably reifies the bodies involved as heterosexual. Because the

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<sup>27</sup> Ann Pellegrini, "Signaling Through the Flames," 920.

bodies are in process of being created in a Hell House, performing hetero-erotically engenders heteronormative Christian identities.

Despite efforts to consult a book on feminist corporeality like Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, I recognize that how I perceive, experience, and write about sexuality is ultimately localized in a body I consider heterosexual and male. As such, the following discussion on *Nightmare*'s date rape scene could be experienced and analyzed along other ways of knowing. That said, I would contend that given the heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies embedded in the content, structure, and politics of Hell Houses, while a hetero-masculinist reading of the scene will not offer the only means for analysis, it can illuminate a few particular dynamics operating in the generation of Evangelical Christian identities.

Ann Pellegrini's comments address the potential for Hell Houses to arouse participants through a queer representation of homosexuality. I wish to discuss the import of arousal in a queer representation of heterosexuality. This representation, like the representation of homosexuality, can offer a means of resistance that destabilizes the patriarchal and heteronormative politics of Evangelical Christianity and Hell Houses. As an audience member, the body I was closest to during the scene was that of the scantily-clad woman. The room was built on a raked stage with the head of the bed positioned downstage. Between the bed sheet which wrapped around the victim's chest and the verticality of her body, the audience was invited to see the young woman's cleavage for quite some time. Furthermore, a post-adolescent male physically mounted her physical body and moved his hand to push the sheet up her leg. Two guides led our group of the dorm room into the next scene before much else happened, but the young man still had to simulate violating the woman's body until our group left the room. The first night I went, the actor kept his hand on his female counterpart's leg while he made it

look like he was trying to kiss her but failed to do so partly because of her dazed resistance and partly because of his inebriation. The second night I went, a different actor was a bit more forward: he moved his hips, as if he were dry-humping his scene partner in character and in reality. The actor was not going to go any further, but his character was just getting started. We left before anything else happened.

*Nightmare* performed for four to five hours, three nights a week, for four weeks. While I doubt it was the norm, I am intrigued as to what happens to a Christian identity when bodies (either those of the performers or audience members) experience some measure of sexual arousal during the scene condemning the sexuality it is depicting. This moment of ambivalence and resistance can illustrate particularities of the Evangelical Christian identity as well as contribute to further discussions of what is meant by “resistance” in identity politics.

To examine arousal in the body as a process as a moment of resistance, notions of arousal must be reexamined and resituated. Arousal is generally perceived as reactionary to external stimuli; thus, it ties into theories of the body as either a medium or part of the discourses of natural and biological sciences. Elizabeth Grosz, exploring the implications of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, outlines radical reconsiderations that can be helpful in this discussion. Merleau-Ponty based some of his phenomenological theories on a man named Schneider who suffered brain damage which affected his sexuality in ways that it did not impact biological drives like hunger. Schneider could not experience sexual arousal or a drive because he could not distinguish sexual objects from desexualized objects. And he failed to distinguish the differences because his mind could not create a context of potentiality, of the possibility of sexuality. Merleau-Ponty argued against prevailing Freudian discussions of sexuality as a drive and

resituated desire as a matter of perceiving objects in a created context of a set of future possibilities. Grosz explains,

This erotic and eroticizing perception, in which the subject is open to and partially productive of the intimate exploration of and attachment to a sexual object, is a projection of possible futures onto the structure of the lived present [ . . . ] Sexuality is not a reflex arc but an “intentional arc” that moves and is moved by the body as acting perceiver.<sup>28</sup>

Grosz finds faults with these conclusions; suggesting if Freud overestimated desire, then Merleau-Ponty underestimated it. Furthermore, she argues that the theory fails to fully articulate male sexuality and simply ignores female sexuality. That said, the repositioning of sexuality as an “intentional arc” rather than a reactionary impulse, can prove helpful in considering arousal in *Nightmare*'s date rape scene.

Along the lines of a content-based reading, as Ann Pellegrini's logic suggests, if *Nightmare*'s date rape scene facilitates arousal, then the medium of theatre disrupts the message of that Hell House. The Hell House wants to reveal to youth that promiscuity and recklessness regarding sexuality is bad; however, the occasional erection seemingly contradicts that message, destabilizing its didactic politics. However, the perverse pleasure operating within the bodies of the performers or the audiences members at that point both disrupt and reinscribe the message and identity politics at work when the body itself is re-examined as a process. The bodies experiencing arousal are not responding to the stimuli but are sexualizing extent objects (namely the young woman's body) and creating a context of future possibilities. For the performer, that future may be perceived as more immediate or probable than for anyone in the audience; he is caressing her leg and will do so again when the next tour group comes through. The arousal is not indicative of a bodily reaction but rather a projected and lived intention. The intentional arc

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 109.



runs contrary to the sexual politics of an Evangelical Christian identity which disavows promiscuity and indulging sexual fantasies. However, any arousal that occurs, threatening to disrupt the message(s) of Hell House, operates within a structure that also immediately condemns such responses.

It should be noted, that this type of heterosexual arousal I am currently discussing and theorizing about is conjectural. Of the two actors that I saw who participated in the date rape scene, neither experienced arousal inasmuch as I could tell. I also have not come across any YouTube video testimonials from patrons that described such a response. That said, I still suggest that considering the possibility as though it has happened is valuable and appropriate. In her article, Ann Pellegrini addressed the fact that Keenan Roberts has started to sell an additional scene that does not come with the standard kit which depicts the “out of control sexual appetite” of contemporary youth. The scene requires a married couple to play the role of two teenagers, an interesting scenario not unlike when a married heterosexual couple (with the woman in drag) plays a gay couple getting married. The scene is described as “tasteful yet sizzling.” Pellegrini compared this to a moment in George Ratliff’s documentary when the Hell House staff of Trinity Church debated whether or not the scene about homosexuality should include a depiction of lesbians flirting with each other. The leader of the group said no to the idea, relating it the reason why their Hell House does not do boyfriend-girlfriend scenes: the actors already spend so much time together, it could lead to something more. Pellegrini suggests, “the concern here is that the intense intimacy of rehearsal will lead to other kinds of intimacies, in which life too much imitates art.”<sup>29</sup>

For Roberts, a married couple can play a heterosexual teenager or a gay couple caught up in the throes of sexual temptation because, technically, any sexual feelings between the actors

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<sup>29</sup> Ann Pellegrini, “Signaling Through the Flames,” 922.

would be acceptable and appropriate. That does not deny the fact that Hell Houses might have the capacity to excite arousal: it anticipates it. Perhaps, *Nightmare* employs a similar policy and only young married couples can participate in the date rape scene.<sup>30</sup> If that is the case, any arousal experienced by either or both of the actors still would occur within a Hell House date rape scene. The space and the dynamics of the performance would still shape the meaning of that expression and experience of sexuality.

Furthermore, as a person with a background in theatre, I am familiar with more anecdotal accounts than I care to remember from peers in high school who described how they were aroused by far less than mounting, caressing, and dry-humping a fellow actor. Perhaps this is far too subjective, but it was the first thought I had when I saw the date rape scene and has since informed my consideration of that performance. Uncomfortable situations abound in high school theatre and performers, with time, tend to laugh off any embarrassment or just try to forget about it. But how do performers who believe that God is part of the process respond? This discussion is conjectural, but it considers (1) how drama ministries performed by teenagers and post-adolescents are related to but different than the performative practices of their peers, and (2) how physical bodies contribute to the generation of an identity and the meaning of a proselytical performance.

If a performer mounts his scene partner in a Hell House and experiences arousal, the semiotics of the space automatically designate that “intentional arc” as sinful by conflating the behavior with the sexuality under condemnation. His erection would illustrate his own sinfulness and need for Christ.<sup>31</sup> The body itself lives simultaneously as sexual and damned, creating (as

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<sup>30</sup> I do not know because they did not return my emails asking whether or not they did.

<sup>31</sup> In Chapter Three, I discuss how contemporary debates within the Evangelical Christian community address a need to recognize and rely on one’s own fallibility in order to evangelize effectively. There are possible echoes here; that

much as performing) the sexual and identity politics of the Evangelical Christian community. I agree with Ann Pellegrini that the moments of resistance can queer theatre in such a way that GLBT youth can enjoy a “perverse” pleasure; however, her point can be expanded to discuss the queer performances of heterosexuality and the “perverse” pleasure it permits or incites. Such moments of resistance function within a space informing how those pleasures are perceived, understood, and lived.

### **Embodying Salvation**

Members of the Evangelical Christian community who produce Hell Houses intend to show outsiders how the world really is. And “outsiders” or “nonbelievers” tend to read Hell Houses to show the world how Evangelical Christians really are.<sup>32</sup> Less has been said on how Evangelical Christians use Hell Houses to show and create for themselves how the world really is and who they as Christians really are. The medium of theatre requires bodies. Hell Houses, as a type of drama ministry, intend to work through those bodies, exorcising demons and vomit while penetrating through his lies. But as a form of faith outreach, Hell Houses primarily function as community-based performances which are insular and self-reflexive. The theology at work presumes the bodies are vessels or mediums; it must to presume the efforts of the Hell House can move guests not only to deny the devil’s animating will but also to champion Christ as witnessing Christians, proliferating the work represented by the Hell House. However, the body itself is created as Christian in the Hell House. That identity is ostensibly communal, knowledgeable, purified (or purged), and saved despite continual sin. The semiotics of the space

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Hell Houses are spaces where committed Christians can see things how they really are by facing their own susceptibility to behaviors they consider sinful.

<sup>32</sup> Explored in Chapter Three.

inform Christians how an Evangelical Christian body and identity is defined and lived. Hell Houses depict sin but they perform salvation.

Chapter Three  
Just Be Yourself:  
Addressing Christianity's Image Problem with a "Real" Evangelism

I did not understand it the first night I went through. Drunk driving, date rape, gang violence, suicide, abortion, Hell, and Christ on the cross—all that made sense; I was expecting it. However, when it came to the final room of *Nightmare*, I confess Guts Church confused me. The last scene disrupted the narrative of a Hell House I anticipated, turning a condemnatory glare not simply towards the "un-churched" or "non-Christians" but instead on "unChristian Christians." Our group witnessed the violence against Christ and his subsequent crucifixion, and then faced off against the devil. In the penultimate vignette, Satan, an attractive, young man in a business suit stood about thirty feet away, explaining that we would probably tell ourselves that the things we saw that night were just part of a bad dream. They were not real and he would continue to deceive us. With a basic mirror illusion, the devil transformed from his tailored suavity into a traditional demon with horns. He started walking towards us slowly, providing enough time for everyone to escape into the next room. I anticipated salvation, a Heaven scenario room or the congregation of Guts Church volunteers waiting to pray with us. The latter of the two options still remained one room away.

The final room, the one I did not understand, was not a brilliant, pristine Heaven to contrast against the darkness of the rest of the *Nightmare*. Instead, it was another dark room with black walls, four wooden pews, and a coffin. A stern, rotund woman wearing a white blouse, grey skirt, and orthopedic shoes approached our group with a collection plate. She presented the plate and showcased the rat sitting on it. It was a real rat; and while the woman handled it, the rat still moved around on the plate by its own accord. The coffin at the front of the room and the piano to its stage right were covered in candles, crucifixes, and more (but less real) rats. One

child sat in a pew listening to a man positioned stage left from the casket. The overhead lighting masked the man's face in shadows. Perching over the pulpit before him in a shape indicative of scoliosis, the man gestured towards the coffin while an automated recording of his voice played: "He's going to Hell! After what he did, there's nothing waiting for him but eternal flames of pain and misery." I did not understand why *Nightmare* had one more scene or vignette, or at least why it was a Hellish type room again rather than a Heavenly one. Why was it a depiction of a funeral service in a church? What was the purpose of this room—theologically and dramaturgically?

At that moment, a video started playing, projected onto a screen above the casket. Pastor Bill Scheer, in a nice casual shirt, pleasantly introduced himself as the pastor for Guts Church. He explained that in the *Nightmare* we saw quite a bit in a little amount of time and probably had a bunch of questions. He prepared us for the next room where representatives of Guts Church were waiting to talk to us and answer those questions. Of everything he said, one comment stood out in particular: "I hope you will understand that the message of Jesus Christ is not a message of condemnation. It's a message of hope and peace that can come into our lives when we accept Christ and His love for us."<sup>1</sup>

It took a second visit through the *Nightmare* and a discussion with one of the volunteers in the prayer tent to process Pastor Scheer's statement and its framing: the last room of this Hell House in Tulsa was a condemnation of Christians who condemn people to Hell—a strange message to preach in a Hell House. Of all the proselytizing methodologies currently employed by Evangelical Christians, how could a Hell House denounce Christians for communicating God's message that Hell is real and certain lifestyles will warrant damnation? Or at least, for conveying that message in such a way that recipients "mistake" the message of Jesus Christ as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A.

message of condemnation? The answers reside in the presence and recognition of the recipients, the cultural outsiders in the Evangelical Christian space.

The final scene of the *Nightmare* damned a contemporary image of Christianity. Some individuals and groups within the Evangelical Christian community recognize the existence and prevalence of their poor reputation among non-Christians. Based on statistical research and anecdotal experiences, parts of the community are addressing the perception American non-Christians or outsiders have of Christians: an image characterized as “unChristian.”<sup>2</sup> This is the term that David Kinnaman uses when he explores this idea in his book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christians . . . and Why it Matters*. Kinnaman’s research reveals an intriguing relationship in America between Christians and non-Christians or, as he refers to them, “outsiders.” But since Kinnaman is a committed Christian writing for a Christian audience, his work also suggests that within the Evangelical Christian community there is an awareness of how they are perceived. Hell Houses are a type of lightning rod for anxieties and tensions: in form and content, they are emblematic of the type of Christianity that Kinnaman considers “unChristian.” Examining how some Evangelical Christians try to reimagine what exactly “evangelism” is and how it can be done in a new paradigm contributes to an understanding of how Hell Houses are utilized by the Christians who do not advocate for them. In other words, Hell Houses become and are used as an antithesis to a new form of evangelism.

Those within the community of belief are not wholly insulated. This “unChristian” image epitomized and propagated by mediums like Hell Houses is part of a larger conversation concerning how Christians believe they should interact with outsiders. As Evangelical

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<sup>2</sup> “unChristian” is the term generated by David Kinnaman to describe how young outsiders and young Christians are coming to view contemporary Christians. They perceive Christians as not living as Christ taught people to live. In other words, they are being “unChristian.” The spelling and formatting are Kinnaman’s and since the chapter consists of closely reading his work and building from it, I find it appropriate to employ it here.

Christians, these pockets of concerned believers hold not only that they are followers of Jesus but also that He has admonished them to actively spread the faith. A negative perception of Christianity, if it precedes its believers, threatens to frustrate the community's ability to fulfill that commandment from God. Some members of the Evangelical Christian community are currently asking if the greatest opposition or obstacle to their efforts is their own tactics and branding—a concern being raised in the community's literature.

For the past few decades, Christian bookstores have sold a number of books written to help Evangelical Christians in their efforts to witness to family members, friends, or strangers. Books include tips for preparing to talk with people, questions to consider asking, or advice on how to steer conversations back to Christ. On the one hand, this atmosphere no doubt encouraged Pastor Keenan Roberts to start marketing and selling his *Hell House Production Kit* since there was market for such a product. But over the last few years, a number of other writers have contributed to a growing sentiment within the community that responds to previous proselytical efforts like Hell Houses. These new works have sought to redefine what “evangelizing” means. This sentiment is foundational to what I refer to as “new paradigm evangelism,” a term I borrow from John Fletcher. The sentiment is that proselytization is easiest and conversions to Christ happen when Christians interact with outsiders on a one-on-one basis, in a normal conversation, where both individuals are “just being themselves.” This is actually part of Kinnaman's recommendation for solving Christianity's image problem. Large events, like Hell Houses, that are designed to effect mass conversions are criticized for being impersonal. At worst, Hell Houses are counterproductive; but even at their best, they are inefficient.

Recommendations like Kinnaman's are echoed in works like Rick Richardson's *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, Martha Grace Reece's



*Unbinding the Gospel: Real Live Evangelism*, Brian D. McLaren's *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith*, Jim Henderson's *Evangelism without Additives: What if Sharing Your Faith Meant Just Being Yourself*, and Gabe Lyons's *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America* to name a few. New paradigm evangelism argues that Christians just need to present who they really are and real conversions will happen. The model of proselytization advocated in books like these not only outlines a new definition and approach, they also try to dissuade the use of large or bombastic events like Hell Houses. However, more importantly, they specifically contrast the soft sell approach against the more aggressive approaches to proselytization. Hell Houses, and the modality of proselytization they represent, are used by Evangelical Christians as a counterpoint, an example of inauthentic Christianity: something they can define themselves against. Compared to the ineffective and ethically questionable Hell Houses, new paradigm evangelism looks more appropriately "Christian"—effectively creating a new permutation of Christianity based, in part, on how it defines itself against Hell Houses.

But not unlike Hell Houses, this reevaluation and redefinition of evangelism itself depends upon a particular construction of reality. It purports that successful evangelism depends on Christians presenting themselves how they really are and representing how Christ really plays a role in their lives. One-on-one conversation is posited as a medium of proselytization that is neutral: it is not a gimmick or a big event like a Hell House; it is way to convey reality. The discourse surrounding the advocacy for this type of soft-sell evangelism ignores how employing a verbal conversation-based modality of proselytization also creates reality. Like Kinnaman and others like him, new paradigm evangelism creates a different image and perception of who Christians really are to outsiders. However, using verbal conversations as a medium of

proselytization constitutes the reality of who Christians are for those within the community as much as it does outside. Furthermore, the discourse of the medium's neutrality—that it supposedly only presents things as they really are—allows the medium to define itself against mediums like Hell Houses that can then be described as not representing a “true” Christianity. The discourse not only procures an authoritative voice that controls the boundaries defining authentic Christianity, but it also casts the alternative as fake, inauthentic, and responsible for the negative image all because it does not depict things how they really are.

New paradigm evangelists may not employ fear tactics or emphasize the consequences of damnation like a Hell House. But ultimately “outsiders” still sit within a framework of an other-ized identity Evangelical Christians are performing for and to. In this chapter, I explore how the advocacy for this new paradigm responds to a negative image of Christianity that exists outside the community. The responsibility for that image has been laid at the feet of Christians that new paradigm evangelists consider “unChristian.” Describing people like Keenan Roberts and mediums of proselytization like Hell Houses as the products of an inauthentic Christianity utilizes Hell Houses to generate a new identity for the Evangelical Christian community. By characterizing the medium of one-on-one conversations and conversions as inherently neutral, that is simply conveying beliefs and experiences how they really are, soft-sell evangelism generates (1) the very reality upon which their argument is based, (2) a new image of “Christianity” to present to themselves and to outsiders, and (3) a legitimate voice of authority by which they can define the boundaries of authentic Christianity—a Christianity that does not include Roberts, his production kits, or the very idea of a Hell House.

I start this chapter with that notion of authority and authenticity by establishing a theoretical framework to interrogate the implications and significance of “authenticity” in the

construction, performance, and reification of “reality.” Informed by Theodor Adorno’s book *The Jargon of Authenticity* and Richard Shechner’s work in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, I outline how I am approaching the political relationship between the generation of “reality” and a discourse of authenticity. Next, I conduct a close reading of David Kinnaman’s *unChristian* to outline how the new paradigm Evangelical Christians are perceiving their own image in the refracted mirror that outsiders are holding up to their community. According to Kinnaman, outsiders believe Christians are predominately hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered or ignorant, too political, and judgmental. The following section then suggests how Hell Houses are positioned as spaces of inauthentic Christianity because they perpetuate the beliefs and methodologies of an evangelism that is decidedly unChristian. Finally, I look at the new paradigm’s solution—soft-sell conversation-based conversion—offered in *unChristian* and Jim Henderson’s *Evangelism without Additives*.

By evaluating how their argument for an evangelism inspired by an authentic Christianity actually grants legitimacy to their construction of reality, I conclude with a reflection on the ways in which one-on-one conversation-based proselytization eventually creates the very binarizing dynamics its advocates ironically condemn in Hell Houses. Because the mediums of proselytization are not simply passive or neutral, they are constitutive in the processes creating messages, meanings, beliefs, and identities. But positioning the mediums as neutral legitimizes and necessitates the use of those mediums. Those mediums, in turn, create the “reality” they supposedly reflect.

### **“How Things Really Are” and the Jargon of Authenticity**

Many of the advocates of Hell Houses extol the capacity of the medium to depict life how it really is. The sentiment seems to be shared by a number of guests who come to see the event.

In the next chapter, I discuss response videos that guests of *Nightmare* are able to make and post to YouTube right after they exit the event. A great number of these videos include statements like, “They’re all based on real life stories . . . so you can apply it to your real life,”<sup>3</sup> and, “You get to see life, what things teenagers go through.”<sup>4</sup> Hell Houses present the reality that abortions happen and that people are dying from accidents caused by drunk driving; moreover, though, Hell Houses represent the reality that the consequences of immoral behavior is damnation, that there is a devil invested in deceiving people, and that there is a god named Christ who is involved in our lives. Detractors of Hell Houses, specifically those that are Christians as well, criticize Hell Houses for not being “true” or “real” representations of Christianity or what Christians believe. New paradigm evangelism and soft-sell approaches tend to legitimize their own efforts with a gesture of “authenticity.” Simple and honest one-on-one conversations are successful in proselytization, ostensibly, because it allows the proselytizer, the Christian, to be whom he or she “really is.”

This section provides an overview of the theoretical paradigm I use to frame this chapter’s exploration of “reality.” Overall, this thesis is interested in how the generation of a discourse can shape reality. Discourses built around mediums of proselytization inform what reality is like for those who use that particular medium. Because these realities are constructed and performed, such realities can be interrogated. Furthermore, applying scrutiny reveals the politics of power informing the implementation of that discourse. In other words, saying a medium is neutral grants authority and legitimacy to certain members of the community to define what a “Christian really is” because they can create and define what reality is. In this chapter, but

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<sup>3</sup> Allison, “NightmareTulsa's webcam video October 31, 2010, 06:12 PM,” YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/user/NightmareTulsa#p/u/3/4oOc8OxEMsU>, 31 October 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Jordan, “me and Jordans experience,” YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/user/NightmareTulsa#p/u/13/dGNkPsUZGjI>, 31 October 2010.

on a smaller scale, I am interested in demonstrating how new paradigm evangelism defines its efforts against proselytical practices like Hell Houses by claiming that such enterprises are not inspired by Christ or run by “real” Christians. Championing verbal conversations where individuals can be who they “really are” because of Christ does not, at least for them, appear to constitute the “reality” of who Christ is or who His followers are. Conversely, I argue that it does. And suggesting that the modality of basic conversations does not shape either the message of Christ or the people expressing that message conceals a struggle within the community over an authoritative power to control and define reality and Christian identity.

There is obviously a lot of literature regarding the nature of reality; my work here is specifically informed by the works of Richard Shechner and Theodor Adorno. The former suggests ways in which performance depends upon a “restoration of behavior” that claims to imitate the past, an idea, or reality. However, in the process of imitation, a performance actually contributes to the creation of the past, an idea, or reality. The latter offers a line of thought in which we can consider the generation of a discourse or a “jargon” of authenticity as a means to create legitimacy. New paradigm evangelism has the power to say what makes a “real” Christian because they claim to use a medium that presents how things really are. The jargon reifies the reality created by the performance’s restoration of behavior.

In his book *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Shechner theorizes about performances as being comprised of actions or materials that he considers living behaviors. He argues that these living behaviors, which make up any number of different types of performances, are “restored behaviors.” Comparing the behaviors to strips of film that can be rearranged or restructured during editing, Shechner suggests that restored behaviors exist independently and outside of those enacting the behavior. A restored behavior, because it is

performed, is necessarily separate from the one behaving. But this very gap allows for distancing and revision which can edit or nuance the behavior like film editing alters the strips of film.

Shechner explains,

Because the behavior is separate from those who are behaving, it can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed. The performers get in touch with, recover, remember, or even invent these strips of behavior and then rebehave according to these strips, either by being absorbed into them (playing the role, going into a trance) or by existing side by side with them (Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*).<sup>5</sup>

The distance between the behavior and the one enacting the behavior facilitates the process of recovering and inventing the behavior, which in turn contributes to a development of (or change in) something that has "already happened."<sup>6</sup> The shape that restored behaviors take in a performance can change because it isn't something natural, "but a model of individual and collective human choice."<sup>7</sup> That model shapes the order of the restored behavior which then has the capacity to remember or recreate a psychological state, history, or reality.

Shechner specifically mentions Christian passion plays as performances where restored behaviors "exist in a nonordinary sphere of sociocultural reality."<sup>8</sup> Passion plays present the actions of the end of Christ's life that are recorded either in scriptural accounts or in traditional lore. Believers take on the identities of Christ, his apostles, Pilot, and deriding Romans and Jews and enact events that may or may not have occurred as they are recorded. Yet, enacting the events relies upon restored behaviors to create a sociocultural reality of that event for the community; for the community, the restored behaviors presented in the passion play constitute

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Shechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36.

that reality. That community may only include the performers, but it could also include the audience. Reality, or an order of how things are and have been, can be reflected in a performance; but the rearrangements in the restored behaviors within a performance can also shape a community's constitution of reality.

Hell Houses are performative practices where the actors take on personas and enact behaviors which, ostensibly, they are distanced from in order to present how things really are. Like the individual in the aforementioned *Nightmare* YouTube video said, in a Hell House, "You can see life, what teenagers go through." Creating a room where a girl receives an abortion presents an idea that that is what teenagers go through. It becomes a "reality" for those in the faith of what life outside of the Christian faith is like. But populating that room with demons and depicting the adolescent's death, suicide, or torment in Hell because she had an abortion, frames the abortion within a restored behavior of "sinful acts which lead to damnation." The performance (re)members the devil is behind the choices that lead to, encourage, and facilitate abortions; the performance's arrangement of restored behaviors creates the reality it purports to reveal. Hell Houses reflect ideas conveyed through other mediums like sermons; but, in part, they are showing things "how they really are" because in the showing they are creating things "how they really are."

In this chapter, I suggest that new paradigm evangelism and soft-sell approaches that value conversation based conversion rely on a similar process of reality creation. The idea championed behind one-on-one conversations and alternative definitions of evangelism is that it allows a Christian to present who he or she "really" is to someone that is not Christian. One recurring piece of advice is for Christians to utilize their flaws when witnessing by being honest about their imperfections. In an old image of evangelism, the new paradigm argues, Christians

presented themselves as perfected by their faith in Christ; but now Christians need to consider how that approach makes it sound like they think they have everything figured out and when they make mistakes they look like hypocrites. New paradigm evangelism encourages people who are witnessing to avoid confessing a litany of sins to strangers while considering the value in sharing how despite their mistakes and short-comings Christ helps them through difficult times. The point is for the Christian to be him or herself, and harmonizing an imperfect personality with a faith in Christ is part of that self.<sup>9</sup>

But the idea that Christianity is defined as a community of imperfect believers is itself a re-creation of a particular reality. Richard Shechner suggests, “Restored behavior offers to both individuals and groups the chance to rebecome what they once were—or even, and most often, to rebecome what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become.”<sup>10</sup> This happens in Hell Houses, almost in a reverse process, by allowing the community to become what they “wish *not* to become” so they can define their beliefs and Christianity against their performance. In Hell Houses, Christians take on the identities of people who are either not Christian or not acting like authentic Christians. Actors assume the identities of homosexuals, promiscuous teenagers, and party animals that drink alcohol and use recreational drugs. Taking on those identities which are depicted as damned allows the actors to perform themselves as disassociated from sinful behaviors and the subsequent damnation. In his article on Hell Houses, John Fletcher suggests that this allows for a space where Evangelical Christian teenagers have the potential to critically think about how it is to live or think differently.<sup>11</sup> But they are also creating an idea of how

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<sup>9</sup> This perception of a new evangelism repeated in a number of books I read. See Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006, 15-30; and Jim Henderson, *Evangelism without Additives: What if Sharing Your Faith Meant Just Being Yourself?* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2005), 5-16 and 81-103.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Shechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> John Fletcher, “Tasteless as Hell: Community Performance, Distinction, and Countertaste in Hell House,” *Theatre Survey*, 327



others or outsiders live and think differently. The restored behaviors of drinking and unrestrained sexuality become linked to a damnation that the community knows it can avoid as long as it refrains from such behavior. The community and Christian identity become defined as antithetical to a set of behaviors or reality the community wishes not to become.

However, the idea of “being yourself,” presenting “who you really are” in a conversation, also depends upon a creation of what a “Christian self is.” The performative act of evangelizing through a medium of conversation reflects and creates a reality as much as Hell Houses do. It frames the relationship between Christians and outsiders differently but it also alters what being a “real” Christian means. The next section explores how David Kinnaman’s book *unChristian* implies that the Christian community has a bad image with non-Christians because Christians have actually not been behaving correctly; the problem stems from believers not acting like Christians—as though that identity and the “reality” it presumes were stable things.

Authentic Christian identity becomes something contestable. Because Kinnaman’s book, other works of new paradigm evangelism, and Hell Houses each purport to depict life or individuals “how they really are,” to some extent they all claim authority to know how to define or convey reality. Old and new forms of evangelism each find legitimacy in a “jargon of authenticity.” In his book, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor Adorno critiques not only the merits of German existential philosophies that followed World War II, but also lambasts the discourse that was created around those philosophies—a discourse purporting the significance of authenticity. The jargon of authenticity builds up an idea that a conversation or an identity is authentic when it is immanent or fully present, but erecting a notion of authenticity implicitly or deliberately sets up a value-based apparatus that confers significant sociopolitical power. In

regards to the idea that basic conversation can convey reality, Adorno offers an interesting insight:

The jargon—objectively speaking a system—uses disorganization as its principle of organization, the breakdown of language into words in themselves [. . . The idea of a] “statement” thus wants to make believe that the existence of the speaker has communicated itself simultaneously with his subject matter and has given the latter its dignity [. . . And] theology is tied to the determinations of immanence.”<sup>12</sup>

Supposedly, when there is authenticity, it is in the very act of uttering words that the speaker has been communicated. Adorno details failures with this assumption, but because Shechner’s ideas about the creation of reality through performance echo them, I will not repeat Adorno’s critique of immanence here.

Instead, it is important to highlight that this system of language becomes an apparatus utilized to obtain power. According to Adorno, “‘Inauthentic’ in that way becomes a ‘critical’ term, in definite negation of something merely phenomenal. However, the jargon extracts authenticity, or its opposite, from every such transparent context.”<sup>13</sup> As a value system is established that can categorize something as “authentic” or “inauthentic” it becomes possible to either legitimize or discredit an idea, way of thinking, or identity. Labeling something as “inauthentic” grants a degree of power and authority to the arbiter or labeler, a power that seems absolute. New paradigm evangelism posits one-on-one conversations as a neutral medium of proselytization that (supposedly) conveys how Christians really are, a claim dependent on the inauthenticity of other methodologies of proselytization. One such methodology described as inauthentic for this jargon to work is the Hell House approach.

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<sup>12</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 7, 8, 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

## **unChristian: What a Christian Statistician Really Thinks about Christianity's Image . . . and Why It Matters**

No church produces a Hell House in a cultural vacuum. They are attempting to proselytize their message in a hyper-mediated environment. Describing Hell Houses as a way to seize the attention of unbelievers, Pastor Keenan Roberts is quoted on his church's website, saying, "The method is timely! The message is timeless! Desperate times call for drastic measures!"<sup>14</sup> The website goes on to colorfully describe and advertise the drastic measures of a Hell House as, "the most 'in-your-face, high-flyin', no denyin', death-defyin', Satan-be-cryin', keep-ya-from-fryin', theatrical stylin', no holds barred, cutting-edge' evangelism tool of the new millennium!"<sup>15</sup> To some Evangelical Christians the aggressive "in-your-face" and "cutting-edge" dynamics of Hell Houses do more harm to the dissemination of Christ's message. This section describes that sentiment and the harm it might be causing for the image of Christians to those outside of their community. Conducting a close-reading of David Kinnaman's book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* indicates a concern within the Evangelical Christian community that outsiders perceive all Christians as the type of Christians that are in or are running Hell Houses. Hell Houses are described as antihomosexual, judgmental, and manipulative for the purpose of conversion. Kinnaman's research indicates that outsiders are describing Christians as hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered or ignorant, too political, and judgmental. The close reading reveals how new paradigm Christians are concerned that the tactics and beliefs of Christians using mediums of proselytization like Hell Houses are responsible for generating Christianity's negative image. Furthermore, the fact that Hell Houses do have traits in common with

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<sup>14</sup> Keenan Roberts, *New Destiny Christian Center*, accessed 24 September 2010, [http://www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/HH\\_kit.cfm](http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_kit.cfm)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Kinnaman’s list of unChristian attributes implicates the Hell House trend as a product of inauthentic Christianity.

In 2003, a young church leader named Gabe Lyons founded a nonprofit organization called the Fermi Project. In turn, the Fermi Project funded the Barna Group’s efforts to research the negative perceptions that 16 to 29 year-olds have of Christians. In 2007, David Kinnaman published the results and implications of his surveys and interviews in *unChristian*. Since that time, the Fermi Project has been reorganized into a project called Q (qideas.org). Q represents Lyons’s continued attempts to assist Christians reevaluate their place in society and their interactions with others. Based on previous Q-commissioned studies in a similar vein to those collected for *unChristian*, in October 2010, Gabe Lyons published *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America*. He argues that America is a postmodern, post-Christian culture—a proposition he finds optimistic. But he’s candid: if Christians want to have any cultural influence, they have to begin thinking of their beliefs and position in society as countercultural rather than as relevant. Much of this argument is based on the work presented in Kinnaman’s *unChristian*.

Kinnaman unabashedly starts his book with a simple statement: “Christianity has an image problem.”<sup>16</sup> And based on the research he and his colleagues gathered, that image is often described as “unChristian.” People between 16 and 29 predominately describe Christians by reverting to any combination of six recurring labels: hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered or ignorant, too political, and judgmental.<sup>17</sup> “They think

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<sup>16</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 11.

<sup>17</sup> In quoting the findings of Kinnaman’s research, both the statistics and the conclusions he draws, I do not pretend to possess a sufficient skill set to interrogate the validity of his methods or results. I am more interested in the role his claims play in the dynamic discourses within the Evangelical Christian community. For my project, referencing his work facilitates an investigation into how what Kinnaman says both reflects and contributes to the shape of

Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity in our society is not what it meant to be.”<sup>18</sup> Kinnaman suggests this is a belief shared by many “outsiders,” the term he uses to describe “non-Christians” that are (1) atheists or agnostics, (2) those affiliated with a faith other than Christianity (such as Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Mormonism , and so on), or (3) other unchurched adults who are not born-again.<sup>19</sup> But, in perhaps one of the more interesting findings of their research, Kinnaman continually reiterates that when he says “people between 16 and 29,” he is not just referring to “outsiders.” He is actually describing the opinion many young Christians have about Christians. Young Christians—to a degree unparalleled by at least the last two or three generations—are starting to believe Christians are antihomosexual, too political, and judgmental. With this in mind, it is not too surprising that Gabe Lyons said the following about why he commissioned this work: “I wanted to get to the root cause of what seemed to be a *rapid deterioration of our identity*. I sensed that if we didn’t do something now, the reputation of Christianity would be at stake in future generations.”<sup>20</sup>

For Kinnaman and Lyons, the inclusion of young Christians among those who perceive Christians as unChristian is a significant reason to understand what the younger generation thinks, but it is certainly not the only reason. They specifically list four reasons under a section titled “Why Perceptions Matter:” (1) what people think about Christians influence how they respond to us; (2) what people think about Christians should help us be objective; (3) what people think of Christians can change; and (4) what people think about Christians reflect

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beliefs and opinions within the Evangelical Christian community regarding itself, its identity, and its proselytizing methodologies.

<sup>18</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> “Outsiders” is the term Kinnaman decided on after finding ethical difficulties with a term like “non-Christians” because it defines people by what they are not. Other similar terms in Christian vocabulary apparently tend to be “lost,” “pagan,” or “seekers.” “Outsiders” seemed less offensive and is used to describe “those looking at the Christian faith from the outside, including atheists, agnostics, those affiliated with a faith other than Christianity (such as Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Mormonism , and so on), and other unchurched adults who are not born-again Christians.” See *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Gabe Lyons, afterword to *unChristian* by David Kinnaman, 221, emphasis added.

personal stories.<sup>21</sup> Kinnaman repeatedly implores readers to understand that perceptions shape reality. Whether or not a Christian feels that “antihomosexual” or “hyper-political” are fair characterizations of Christianity actually does not matter: if that’s what the new generation believes about Christians, then that is their reality. But for Kinnaman and most young people, it is not as though the identity of Christians is a creation of enemies and detractors.<sup>22</sup> Kinnaman explains,

The primary reason outsiders feel hostile toward Christians, and especially conservative Christians, is not because of any specific theological perspective. What they react negatively to is our “swagger,” how we go about doing things and the sense of self-importance we project [ . . . ] One of the surprising insights from our research is that the growing hostility toward Christians is very much a reflection of what outsiders feel they receives from believers. They say their aggression simply matches the oversized opinions and egos of Christians.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of this “swagger,” it is interesting that in another part of their research, Kinnaman and his colleagues found interesting results among young outsiders in reaction to the term “evangelical.” People were more familiar with the term “born-again Christian” than the term “Evangelical Christian.” However, those who noted familiarity with the latter expressed far more oppositional and negative impressions of Evangelical Christians. While 35 percent of outsiders had a bad impression of born-again Christians, Evangelical Christians faced 49 percent. 10

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<sup>21</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian*, 37-38.

<sup>22</sup> One part of Kinnaman’s survey and interviews included an investigation into the role “secular” media played in shaping the Christian image. “On the subject of Christians being portayed inaccurately in the media, only 9 percent of young outsiders and only one-fifth of young churchgoers (22 percent) said that Christianity has received a bad reputation from television and movies.” Kinnaman follows this up by suggesting that “young people” are not always aware of how the media “silently shapes” their lives, suggesting room for the reality of the media playing a larger role while still advocating that people believe that their experiences play a greater role in shaping their expectations of Christians. See *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

percent of outsiders noted a good impression of born-again Christians, but Evangelicals only received such commendation from 3 percent of the sample group.<sup>24</sup>

The book tries to dispel the myth or easy evasion that negative perceptions of Christianity stem from outsiders denying the faith. Ultimately, Kinnaman and Lyons lay stock and faith in the fourth reason of why their results and outsiders' opinions matter: what people think about Christianity reflects their personal stories. If that is the case, then the image can change one basic interaction at a time. A new generation of Americans believe Christians are antihomosexual (an image held by 91 percent of outsiders), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent) primarily because of their interactions with, not their isolation from, Christians. If those interactions are the problem, then they're also the key to the solution. The modality of the interaction itself, having the personal or one-on-one conversation, is inherently neutral—it can be used to cultivate *or* alienate an outsider's faith. If a Christian shares who he or she really is, then a positive interaction can cultivate a better image *and* possibly conversion.

By the logic of Kinnaman's argument, the type of proselytization that Hell Houses epitomize actually alienates others because, ultimately, it is not authentically Christian—in approach or in content. The book *unChristian* goes on to analyze each of the six categories of problematic perceptions detailing Christianity's current image and suggesting a corrective means to redeem the reputation of Christians based on one-on-one conversations and interactions. For Kinnaman, even though some people may be described as such, "true" or "real" Christians are not anti-homosexual, judgmental, or hypocritical. Still, he does not consider how advocating for conversations where people present "who they really are" in itself constructs the reality of who Christians really are.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 25.

## **Hell Houses are *unChristian*: Presuming the Inauthenticity**

In this section, I read Hell Houses as a space of an inauthentic Christianity or as a medium that perpetuates the negative image of Christianity outlined by Kinnaman. The content and the methodology of a Hell House exemplify everything that Kinnaman says outsiders find unchristian about Christians. More than that though, they would seem to be indicative of what Kinnaman considers unChristian about some Christians. Even though the last room in *Nightmare* tried very hard itself to clarify the difference between Christ's real message and what people try to pass off as the message of Jesus Christ, Hell Houses cannot escape their own inauthenticity. According to Kinnaman's alignment of reality and what a Christian really is, no matter how well-intentioned, Pastor Keenan Roberts may very well not be representing Jesus Christ.

There are times throughout *unChristian* when Kinnaman seems to be responding specifically to the politics and mentality of Roberts. One such area is the notion of the significance of media coverage. In her article, Ann Pellegrini recounts her interview with Pastor Roberts. She relates his optimistic reaction to the controversy Hell Houses cause: "He considers such controversies an 'incredible blessing.' The media storm has been a means of 'amplifying the message' well beyond what the church could achieve on its own."<sup>25</sup> Any press is great press. Even when Hollywood-based writers Maggie Rowe and Jill Soloway obtained a Hell House Outreach Kit under false pretenses and staged a parody Hell House with comedians like Bill Mahar and Sarah Silverman to mock Christians, Keenan Roberts expressed jubilation: "It's exciting. Hell House is going to another state of exposure."<sup>26</sup> In 2006, the New York City based troupe *Les Freres Corbusier*, purchased a kit and consulted Roberts as they prepared a museum-piece production of Hell House. Negative media coverage, disparaging parodies, and secular re-

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<sup>25</sup> Ann Pellegrini, "'Signaling Through the Flames': Hell Houses Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling," *American Quarterly*, 918.

<sup>26</sup> Adam B. Vary, "Hell House of the Stars," *Advocate*, 12 October 2004, 82.



creations—though recognized as three different things—still constitute one main objective: attention.

There is an immediate, divine reason attention is important. In the Hell House Outreach Kit, Roberts cites the media's attention as part of God's work.

God used this vehicle of attention as a springboard to declare the message of life in Jesus Christ around the world! He created this tidal wave of interest to shine the Light! Yes, the media wanted to focus on the "controversial" aspects of what we were confronting. We answered their tough questions with tough but loving answers about homosexuality and abortion. God was allowing us to proclaim Truth and Hope! They were running to us, pursuing what we had to say. As the Lord empowered us, we seized every opportunity.<sup>27</sup>

Roberts continues that the kit itself is an extension of the media attention and God's work.

People responded; Hell Houses raised some heads and God reentered public discourses in a new way. The kit presumably can facilitate that miracle in other communities. The rationale runs that Roberts and other Evangelicals need to spread Christianity to a generation that not only is apathetic to the content of their message but that is so preoccupied with other media that traditional forms of delivering that message are obsolete. Hell Houses are effective if for no other reason than that they stop people, requiring them to think about Christ—an approach David Kinnaman finds damaging.

Kinnaman never specifically discusses Hell Houses; however, his research contests the premises on which the form and the content of a Hell House rest. When addressing the image problem that Christians are too focused on getting converts, Kinnaman interrogates the mythologies surrounding some techniques of evangelism. Basically, he asked converts how they

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<sup>27</sup> Keenan Roberts, *Hell House Outreach Kit: Manual* [CD File] (Thornton, Colorado: New Destiny Christian Center, 1996–2010), 9.

came to Christ to see if there were any cases suggesting correlation or causation between either evangelical programs or faith-sharing activities and effective conversions. There are a number of misconceptions about the efficacy of some programs which Kinnaman refers to as myths. He lists six, but the first three specifically confront the form and structure of Hell Houses: (1) The best evangelism efforts are those that reach the most people at once; (2) Anything that brings people to Christ is worth doing; and (3) We cannot worry about the possibility of offending people when sharing the truth about Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Especially in his discussion of the “reality” behind the first two myths, Kinnaman contests Roberts’s faith in the potential of media. “In an era of mass media, it is easy to believe that the more eyeballs, the more impact. But radio, television, and tracts accounted for a combined total of less than one-half of 1 percent of [those] who are born again.”<sup>29</sup> The belief that negative coverage will bring people to Christ lacks both statistical and anecdotal support. Still, both Kinnaman and Roberts would mutually concede that God cares about even those individuals falling into the microscopic percentile who come to Christ because of media.

Kinnaman does report that one third of conversions do stem from attending a church meeting or evangelical event, which could include Hell Houses. That said though, Kinnaman also states, “In our research with some of the leading ‘mass evangelism’ efforts, we found that *often these measures create three to ten times as much negative responses to positive.*”<sup>30</sup>

Arguably, Hell Houses contribute to the production of much more “collateral damage” than they do conversions. According to Hell101.com’s statistics, over the last five years, *Final Destination*

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<sup>28</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian*, 70-71.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. “Born again” is an elusive term, one which can mean a lot of things to different people, as *unChristian* explores. It is helpful to note how Kinnaman defined the term for his project. “To be classified as a born-again Christian, a person has to say he or she has made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important and that the person believes he or she will go to heaven at death, because the persona has confessed his or her sinn and accepted Christ as Savior.” See Ibid, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 71, original emphasis.

managed to provoke approximately one hundred guests to anger enough that the church categorizes them as “Mad!”<sup>31</sup> In 2009, one such individual created a video where he interrogated a few church volunteers about the ethics of producing a “fake haunted house.” The video-maker considered the Hell House deceptive and judgmental. This man posted the video on YouTube under the title “Phoenix church-owned Hell House says ‘faggot’ openly in haunted house called Final Destination IV.”<sup>32</sup> Though it should be considered that the video maker probably brought a video camera with the intent of making the kind of video he did so he could post it on YouTube, such combative reactions appear reminiscent or indicative of other outsiders’ admissions that their own animosity against Christians merely matches the attitude and demeanor of the Christians they have interacted with. To the video maker, Christians who produce Hell Houses are aggressive and judgmental. Making the YouTube video is simply a response or reaction to that particular type of faith-based demeanor. To Kinnaman, that young man is far less likely to accept Christ because of *Final Destination* than if the Door Christian Center had done nothing.

But it’s not just a matter of form; *unChristian* presents compelling research that complicates the content of Hell Houses. In tackling the root of Christianity’s image problem in regards to the perception that Christians are hypocritical, Kinnaman spends time critiquing the claim based on misuses of the word “hypocrisy” before delving into any moral standard Christians champion in word but fail to observe in deed. His caveat on semantics does not simply invite outsiders to reconsider how they employ the word, but also prepares his readers for a reassessment of Christian standards. When he says that Christians set a standard they do not keep, he does not simply mean that the degree of faith, hope, service, or charity is beyond the capability of humanity, that man cannot be as perfect as Christians believe they strive to be.

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<sup>31</sup> “Hell House Fear Statistics,” *Hell101.com*, accessed 09 Jan 2011, [http://hell101.com/-06\\_\\_\\_\\_07\\_Statistics.html](http://hell101.com/-06____07_Statistics.html)

<sup>32</sup> “Phoenix church-owned Hell House says ‘faggot’ openly in haunted house called Final Destination IV,” YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffZ-pGvcCJA>, 03 Nov 2009.

Kinnaman is suggesting Christians themselves are prioritizing the wrong standards of what it means to be a Christian and communicating that identity to outsiders. Christians have communicated that what is important is how people behave, which Kinnaman suggests is not what “Christians truly believe.” Because Hell Houses depend on presenting behaviors and actions as they “really are,” which is to say “sinful,” they epitomize the type of message Christians have presented to outsiders that have contributed to the generation of a negative, unChristian image.

Among born-again Christians who were asked what they thought were the priorities Christians ought to pursue in terms of their faith, 37 percent said lifestyle (doing the right thing, being good, not sinning), 31 percent suggested discipleship (learning about Christ or the Bible), 25 percent mentioned evangelism (explaining/sharing faith with others), another 25 said worship, and other answers included relationships, service, and stewardship.<sup>33</sup> Kinnaman says this is problematic because it values “being good” as a Christian quality to the point that it generates an image of Christianity as a religion of rules and regulations. He does not really interrogate why he interprets this as an incorrect interpretation of Christianity. Instead, for him, the problem is that outsiders hear “being ‘Christian’ means being good,” or perhaps better than good, but then outsiders do not see that.

Of the young outsiders they interviewed, while 84 percent said they personally knew at least one committed Christian, only 15 percent thought the lifestyles of those Christ followers were significantly different than the norm for others who do not profess such faith.<sup>34</sup> This perception reads with other data that they collected among a number of Christians from different age groups. When it comes to behavioral, lifestyle choices of being good and not sinning, the

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<sup>33</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

actions of Christians were statistically equivalent to those who did not consider themselves born-again.

David Kinnaman argues Christians inadvertently generate the image of hypocrisy as part of a Christian identity because in their interactions with Outsiders, the primary marker they showcase that makes Christians different is being good and not sinning. If Christians emphasized discipleship, worship, or evangelism to outsiders, there would be a greater chance outsiders would not perceive Christians as hypocritical. Arguably, Hell Houses do not do this. Because they don't, they are considered judgmental. As John Fletcher suggests, the medium employs a "dystopian performative."<sup>35</sup> Hell Houses are "seeking to foster not rejuvenation and inspiration (imagine what we could accomplish) but fear-induced transformation of character."<sup>36</sup> Inducing fear rather than rejuvenation is usually interpreted by outsiders and new paradigm Evangelical Christians as judgmental—a key marker of Christianity's image problem. One of the problematic scenarios in Hell Houses that are usually read as strangely judgmental and characteristically unChristian are the depictions of suicide and its eternal consequences.

Unlike many Hell Houses, *Nightmare* forewent an abortion scene, but provided in its place was a double suicide. After leaving a scene of gang violence in a suburban mall, audiences were taken into a young man's bedroom. He paced around anxiously as a video of girl played on a television. The girl was emotionally distraught, blaming the guy for convincing her to get an abortion. After she said she knew she was going to Hell for the decision she made, the tape ended with her confession that there was not much of a point to go on anymore. Eventually the man sat down, put a gun in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. Brain material splattered the wall behind him as he went limp in the chair and the mirror on the wall right above his bed became

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<sup>35</sup> John Fletcher, "Tasteless as Hell," 322.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

transparent. The next room, a bathroom could be seen. Audiences were then led through the bathroom where the girl lay bloody in a bathtub, her wrists slit and the wall covered in names written in blood—the names she could never give to her unborn child. The automated voice talked about deceiving people with depression to the point that they believe there is no hope.

Like all of the scenes in the *Nightmare*, this abortion and dual suicide scene was fairly stylized for the sake of fear and narration: the amount of blood on the wall and in the bathtub far exceeded what would “really” come out of a human being. However, of all the scenes, it was also the most “real” in terms of how a Hell House constructs a reality. On the one hand, it was the most “realistic” looking room in the entire Hell House, as if it were taken right out of Tulsa suburban home. More importantly though, it fit the model of the dystopic performative: Hell Houses attempt to change behavior and character through fear so when teenagers face moments where they make decisions they’ll know that the devil is trying to deceive them. And if they choose Christ, things will be better.

Most of the other scenes showed the consequences of immoral behavior: families were dead because of drunk driving, women were raped because they trusted someone they shouldn’t have, or people were seriously injured because they attended unsafe and violent parties. The girl’s suicide and the man’s depression also were consequences of their immoral behavior. Yet, the scene started and dramaturgically worked around that young man’s choice. It was framed by the devil gloating over manipulating our depression to the point we take our own lives. Hell Houses show things “as they really are” so people can be aware of Satan’s influence, so they can choose Christ. The double suicide scene depicted a young man choosing the immoral behavior. And the consequences immediately followed that choice: his brain splattered, his girlfriend was revealed dead, and the devil gloated. That is the reality that Hell Houses perceive and perform.

At the end of the day, however, for outsiders and new paradigm Christians, it is difficult if not impossible for anyone to portray the condemnation of a suicide victim without appearing judgmental. Kinnaman's book continually purports, Christians can address their image problem; however, in the meantime, scenes like this are not helping. They simply reify what a new generation really thinks about Christians.

### ***unChristian* is a Hell House: New Paradigm Evangelism also Constructs Reality**

Hell Houses are nothing but a performance of lifestyle. Hell Houses perform a Christianity defined by the absence of sin—no drunk driving, no abortion, no suicide, no homosexuality, no violence. As a proselytizing medium, they advertise to outsiders that lifestyle choices constitute what it means to be a Christian. But the content of Hell Houses also provides a means to challenge Kinnaman's narrative of an authentic Christianity, nuancing this convenient binary polarizing the aggressive Keenan Roberts against the thoughtful David Kinnaman. In this section, I use Hell Houses to evaluate the new approach offered by new paradigm evangelism. Ultimately, the conversation based proselytization still creates a Christian identity that is defined by how it constructs and "other-izes" the outsiders it intends to perform for and to.

In his article "Tasteless as Hell," John Fletcher discusses Hell Houses in relation to the "soft-sell" approach of seeker churches, exploring why a less effective proselytizing tool like Hell Houses would continue when there is presumably a more successful model. Seeker churches embody the new paradigm of evangelism; one that does not discount Hell's existence, but also one which certainly does not play it up. Following the advice of George Barna, a Christian author and publisher (his company published *unChristian*), seeker churches emphasize the services which God can provide people through participation in their church. Fletcher describes the market-driven mentality driving the paradigm:

New-paradigm churches thus market Christianity not (only) as a ticket out of hell but as the surest path to personal fulfillment—spiritual, physical, and financial [ . . . ] Seeker churches ask their consumers, “Is your soul being satisfied?” Contrast that with Hell House’s fear-driven query: “If you died now, are you 100 percent sure that you would wake up in heaven?”<sup>37</sup>

The paradigm of seeker churches reflects a more popular and arguably more efficacious means of evangelism. *unChristian* represents one work coming out of this cultural development. When it comes to (re)presenting Christianity, Kinnaman and Lyons’s prescription for a better evangelism focuses on conversations and individual experiences.

Jim Henderson’s book *Evangelism without Additives: What if Sharing Your Faith Meant Just Being Yourself?* and his website *Off the Map* are other examples of this mentality.

Henderson argues that evangelism needs to be completely redefined as “living more intentionally” rather than looked at like a “formalized and structured program, presentation, or memorized script.”<sup>38</sup> He calls the tactics of traditional evangelism “abnormal behavior” and champions what he calls “free attention giveaways” and “Ordinary Attempts.” Basically, Henderson contends that living a life emulating the teachings of Christ in and of itself provides moments for Christians to share their faith with “those who Jesus misses most” (his term for outsiders). If Christians engage in conversation without the intent to convert outsiders, just carry on a normal conversation, it is much more likely conversion will occur—for the outsider, the Christian, or both.

But still, even in this highly amiable variant of soft-sell evangelism, there remains a Hell House undercurrent revealed in a telling anecdote in the foreword to Henderson’s book. Brian

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<sup>37</sup> John Fletcher, “Tasteless as Hell,” 318.

<sup>38</sup> Jim Henderson, *Evangelism without Additives*, 2-3.



McLaren, who Henderson quotes a number of times throughout *Evangelism without Additives*, recounts a time a Christian radio talk show host interrogated him. The host asked, “If you’re talking with someone who doesn’t believe in Jesus, will you or will you not tell him he’s going to hell?” McLaren responded, “Why would you want me to say that? In my experience, if you begin by condemning people, it doesn’t normally make them want to believe what you believe. It makes them feel intimidated, rejected, insulted, and dehumanized.”<sup>39</sup> The sentiment is nice, but it indicates that underneath the additive free conversation, there remains a concern about the outsider’s eternal destination. What are the possibilities for a conversation when Hell, while dormant, still burns beneath the surface of the dialogue?

The underlying ideology informing Kinnaman’s agenda in *unChristian* suggests similarities between Keenan Roberts’s methodologies and the politics of new paradigm evangelism. As much as Kinnaman and his colleagues strive to challenge Christians to question their techniques and motivations, they are far from abandoning the politics and faith that define certain lifestyle choices as sinful. Kinnaman discusses trends in what young Christians think is morally acceptable as compared to Christians from the previous generation. The startling conclusion evidences that while older Christians convey a faith based on lifestyles, younger Christians “struggle with issues of purity.”<sup>40</sup> An increasing number of young Christians believe cohabitation, gambling, sexual fantasies, premarital sex, profanity, getting drunk, pornography, homosexuality, having an abortion, using prescription drugs recreationally, and allowing the “f” word on television are morally acceptable. Kinnaman reels at the fact that young Christians are most resistant to the f-word on television (7 percent find it acceptable), while adopting moral

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<sup>39</sup> Brian McLaren, Foreword for *Evangelism without Additives* by Jim Henderson, x.

<sup>40</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian*, 52.

license in many other areas of life. Cohabitation and sexual fantasies received a 58 percent approval rating and having an abortion or homosexual relationship measure at 30 percent.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Hell Houses are dangerous not because they depict anything contrary to what many Evangelical Christians believe, but because they do it in a way deemed “unchristlike.” Kinnaman wants to improve the image young outsiders and Christians have of Christians, an image characterized as antihomosexual and too political; however, in both chapters, Kinnaman remains firm that homosexuality is a sin and that Christians should be involved in politics to shape legislation like laws that would outlaw abortion.

In Kinnaman’s terms, Christianity is torn between its negative image and the impulse to allow outsiders to “Hijack Jesus.” Hijacking Jesus occurs when the “unpopular” parts about Christianity are omitted or deemphasized. Kinnaman expresses anxiety with the trend to twist Christ’s image by portraying Christ as an “open-minded, big-hearted, and never-offended-anyone moral teacher. This is an entirely wrong idea of Jesus.”<sup>42</sup> For Kinnaman, Jesus is hijacked when people challenge Christ and the Bible’s declarations on sin and Christians avoid engaging a conversation on the subject. It creates a vacuum that permits Christians to relax and release the convictions of Christ in order to appease outsiders and maintain the image of a loving Christ rather than the type of Christ that might inspire Hell Houses.

But the Hell Houses operate on the same mentality: desire to show people how things really are, concern that Christ’s image is hijacked by moral relativism, and conviction that their methodology is stern but not cruel. In her article, Ann Pellegrini mentions that in her ninety minute interview with Keenan Roberts, he contrasted himself against Pastor Fred Phelps two times. As the leader of the Westboro Baptist Church, Phelps made his small congregation famous

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 34.

for leading protests at the funerals of Matthew Shepherd and military officers who died in Iraq. The church also operates a website called Godhatesfags.com. Roberts, referring to Phelps, said, “He is a raving lunatic . . . Everything he says is so contrary to the Bible.”<sup>43</sup> For Roberts, Hell Houses are aggressive, but they come out of a place of concern and honesty, not hate. When I talked to a volunteer in the prayer tent at Guts Church, we had a similar conversation. I inquired about the final room with the condemnation of other Christians who condemn people, making sure I understood the intent of their message. The volunteer, a young white male in his early thirties named Harold King, also brought up Pastor Phelps and the Westboro congregation. Mr. King made it clear that what Guts Church is doing with the *Nightmare* is not analogous to protesting funerals. That simply is not Christian.

David Kinnaman’s book *unChristian* and the respective Hell Houses of Keenan Roberts and Harold King share these dual anxieties regarding the identity of Christianity: refraining from asserting Christ’s teachings against sin permits others to hijack Christ’s image; but the aggressive, rude, or uncaring tactics of other Christians likewise facilitates a distortion of Christianity. Both cases reveal an awareness of the presence and influences of a cultural other in the process of controlling the construction of Christ’s identity *and*, by association, a Christian identity. Hell Houses represent a space where Evangelicals perform Christianity, but the debates surrounding the appropriateness of proselytizing methods like Hell Houses or the Westboro Baptist Church’s funeral protests house the space where Evangelicals construct the identity of secular outsiders that they intend to perform their Christian identities to later in their own methods of outreach. The soft-sell approach of new paradigm evangelism and the Hell House approach legitimize their practices by applying a discourse of authenticity which in fact creates

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<sup>43</sup> Ann Pellegrini, “Signaling Through the Flames,” 919.

“how things really are” and the definition of a “true Christian.” Both approaches utilize otherized outsiders and “inauthentic Christians” to justify their medium of proselytization.

### **Return to the *Nightmare***

Pastor Bill Scheer’s statement concerning Christianity’s relationship to condemnation qualified not only the final scene of *Nightmare* but also the entire experience. In effect, Scheer asked audience members to reframe how they might be seeing the various scenes. Like any Hell House, *Nightmare* operates on revealing how things really are; abortion, suicide, drunk driving, and homosexuality stem from Satan’s lies and lead to captivity in Hell. However, Christians who try to make God’s laws clear to a jaded and secular world should not condemn sinners. Similarly, non-Christians should not perceive Christ’s message or the content of *Nightmare* primarily as an indictment against themselves. Though rare and far from the normal fare of Hell Houses, this one scene resists and frustrates a binarized Evangelical Christian identity constructed by outsiders and performed by Evangelical Christians. Situated outside the purview of Christianity by Christians, I find it easier to perceive the unstructured and multi-faceted Evangelical community in terms of neat categorizes like “rude Christians” and “thoughtful Christians.” There might be spectrums within those camps—Fred Phelps on one end of the rude-o-meter and Keenan Roberts at the other—but ultimately, Christians are asking one of two questions that John Fletcher articulated: “If you died now, are you sure that you’d go to heaven?” or “Is your soul being satisfied?” The final scene in *Nightmare* collapsed, or at least challenged, my categorization by asking both questions at the same time.

## Chapter Four

### Is Jesus on Facebook?: Negotiating Identity by Performing Christianity through New Media

When the young girl in our group took advantage of the last option to abandon the journey through *Final Destination V*, there were only five of us left for our guide to lead. I felt bad that twelve year old had spent time in a very slow-moving line and ten dollars on a non-refundable ticket; but the worst part about her departure was that she missed one of the most memorable messages I received during my entire Hell House research: the devil is on the Internet and he wants to be your Facebook friend. At the end of the first ominous tunnel, after a few disorienting turns in what seemed like walking in circles, our group came to a dark corner where a large flat screen television projected an image of Jigsaw from the *Saw* film series. Jigsaw ran on a continual loop which repeated three or four times while we were there. A creepy and distorted recorded voice played over the image with enough hints and context clues to let us know the voice was demonic in origin. He informed us, among other things, that he knew everything about us—*everything*: what we had for breakfast that morning, what we planned on doing later that night, all of our hopes and desires. How might the devil be privy to such information? Though the next room depicted an occult-esque ritual human sacrifice, apparently such divination is not the general medium by which the devil gains his knowledge: instead, social media is. The voice gloated, “You tell me everything I want to know. You tell me when you update your status, when you post pictures online.” I’ll admit, due to former law school aspirations from my past, when I first saw Jigsaw my mind wandered, contemplating the legality of using copyrighted footage from a Hollywood film in a venue or attraction designed to make money. I already found it interesting that the name of The Door Christian Center’s Hell House cleverly reappropriated the name of a horror film franchise about death hunting people down.

“Final Destination” is an apt name for a venue that aggressively asked patrons the traditional Hell House question, “If you were to die tomorrow, do you know where you would go: Heaven or Hell?” The fact that *Final Destination* also used footage from another horror franchise was intriguing. However, the devil’s declarations about his presence on the Internet and conviction that we’ll all confirm his friend request arrested my attention and pointed it in a completely different direction than I was taking.

I made jokes to myself, querying about how Satan managed to discern the thoughts of men before the advent of Facebook before I realized that despite the scene’s clunky execution, it’s not without precedent. In the documentary *Hell House*, George Ratliff follows a number of people involved in the production of a Hell House in Cedar Hill, Texas.<sup>1</sup> One parishioner the documentary highlights is a single father raising his children because his wife left him after meeting another man through the Internet. That year, the church decided to have a scene about an alcoholic and abusive father who beats up his daughter when he catches her engaging in a sexual conversation in a chat room online. The Hell House scene reveals that there is no mother in the home because she met a man through the Internet and ran away with him.

In another venue, Pastor Keenan Roberts and the New Destiny Christian Center sell a Hell House scenario online entitled “Cyber-Chick Multimedia Scene Package.” It is not included in the basic kit that I ordered. But according to the website, the Cyber-Chick uses technology to produce a movie and narrates how the work will be distributed through the weaponry of “Internet indiscretion.” The website advertises, “Give your outreach this contemporary TNT to caution of the dangerous cesspool the Internet can become.”<sup>2</sup> Of the Hell Houses I attended, only *Final Destination* commented on the devil’s tactics in the digital cesspool that is the Internet. And the

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<sup>1</sup> George Ratliff (director), *Hell House*, DVD (Brooklyn: Plexifilm, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> “Hell House Resources: Cyber-Chick Multimedia Scene Package,” *New Destiny Christian Center*, accessed 24 September 2010, [http://www.godestiny.org/hell\\_house/HH\\_resources\\_scenes.cfm?p\\_id=3](http://www.godestiny.org/hell_house/HH_resources_scenes.cfm?p_id=3)

great irony about receiving the message concerning Satan’s presence on the Internet at *Final Destination* in Chandler, Arizona was that I found that particular Hell House when I discovered a YouTube video entitled “Phoenix church-owned Hell House says ‘faggot’ openly in haunted house called Final Destination IV.”<sup>3</sup> Finding the video helped me confirm that there was at least one Hell House in Arizona I could attend. Furthermore, it led me to the Door Christian Center’s website.

Like Guts Church, Praise Chapel, and the New Destiny Christian Center, the Door Christian Center benefitted from advertising its Hell House on their church’s congregational website—inasmuch as my attendance counts as “benefitting” them. While *Nightmare* and *Hell Night* did not depict the potential dangers of the Internet, they, along with *Final Destination*, participated in the act of Internet reclamation: making a space for Christ in cyberspace. I chose to attend these three Hell Houses because they each had functioning websites. Information about *Nightmare* and *Final Destination* showed up on Google searches. And while a colleague suggested I might be interested in *Hell Night*, ultimately it was the website with updated information that determined that it would be a Hell House I could and would travel to and investigate. Each of these three churches operates a main congregational website, where the event is advertised, and a separate website just for their Hell House. If the Internet is, in fact, a cesspool and social media plays into the devil’s designs, then Evangelical Christians must combat those plans by introducing Christ into popular spaces created by new media much like Hell Houses strive to bring Christ into the medium of haunted houses.

As evidenced by the content of *Final Destination*, the YouTube video vilifying it, and the website advertising it, the Internet both offers and exists as a contested site of identity

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<sup>3</sup> “Phoenix church-owned Hell House says ‘faggot’ openly in haunted house called Final Destination IV,” YouTube video, accessed 10 September 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffZ-pGvcCJA>, posted 03 November 2009.

performance and creation where both those inside and those outside of the Evangelical Christian community generate representations of Christianity. In this chapter, I address this dialogue between those inside and those outside of the community within the context of a perception prevalent throughout the Evangelical Christian community: that the Internet is an inherently neutral medium. The assumption that the Internet does not play a role in informing the message Evangelical Christians try to share or that using the Internet does not shape the community as it uses it both reflects and perpetuates a dichotomized reality. Because the medium is inherently neutral, it can be used for good or for evil; however, framing the medium as neutral and capable of binarized options reifies the notion of the dichotomy of good and evil. According to this epistemology, the devil uses the Internet to proliferate pornography but Christ redeems cyberspace to assist in the effort to spread the gospel.

The Internet's popular emergence and usage among the Evangelical Christian community coincided with the significant alterations that were shaping Hell Houses in the early and mid-1990s. A number of academic articles, dissertations, and books have been published concerning the rise of congregational websites, blogs, and chain emails. Yet, while some academics have quoted websites related to Hell Houses (primarily that of Keenan Roberts's New Destiny Christian Center), none of the scholarship in Hell House research has examined the relationship between Internet proselytization and Hell House proselytization. Each of the Hell Houses I visited were produced by churches that advertised for their Hell House on their respective congregational websites. Furthermore, each church established a website for their particular Hell House separate from their main congregational website. Praise Chapel used the Internet to provide basic information about *Hell Night*, whereas the Door Christian Center created Hell101.com to post the statistics for *Final Destination* that were discussed in Chapter One.



NightmareTulsa.com uploaded pictures to document its event, promote an opportunity for potential patrons to *Nightmare* to win an iPad, and provided a link to the NightmareTulsa YouTube channel that recorded the videos patrons were invited to make after leaving Guts Church's Hell House.

The websites are designed to marry the proselytical efforts of the Internet and Hell Houses: by advertising the event to more people, more people will come and hear the message of Christ. But the websites also archive the events. The Internet becomes a receptacle or tome of conversions connected to Hell Houses. Because the Internet is perceived as a neutral medium, the Evangelical Christian community ignores how using the Internet not only shapes their community but also Hell Houses themselves. The Hell House experience no longer occurs solely in the converted space of a church. For some patrons, it begins (and sometimes concludes) on the Internet. Examining how the Internet functions as a medium for the Evangelical Christian community and how they perceive it functioning are two different things. But by looking at both, I highlight a new element and dynamic contributing to the identity politics operating in Hell Houses.

Beginning this chapter with a theoretical framework based on Heidi Campbell's book *When Religion Meets New Media*, I add to an existing argument concerning the perceived binarization of the Internet's potential. The belief that the Internet is inherently neutral creates a dichotomy that allows Evangelical Christians to overcome any ideological conflicts their community might potentially have with the medium. The community perceives the medium as a gift from God. Using it expresses gratitude and displays responsibility to God; neglecting the potential of the Internet demonstrates capitulation to the devil. But Campbell explains that using new media like the Internet not only challenges or redefines the religious group in question, but

also impacts the configuration of that medium—a process she calls the “religious-social shaping of technology.”

I begin with a look at what scholars like Campbell refer to as “e-vangelism” by reviewing scholarship conducted on the intersections between religion and forms of new media like the Internet. E-vangelism is the guiding principle for setting up distinct websites not only for the congregations that produce Hell Houses but also for the Hell Houses themselves. E-vangelism supposedly lets more potential patrons know about upcoming Hell Houses and, in the case of some sites, offers testimonials espousing the importance of what Hell Houses depict. Establishing a theoretical apparatus to work from, I determine how the efforts in “e-vangelism” contribute to a process that Heidi Campbell refers to as the religious-social shaping of technology (RSST). This process plays an important role in the generation of Christian identities on the Internet. I suggest those identities are formed in a space where the medium of the Internet is not only framed as a neutral conduit but also appropriate for community use *because* it can be utilized for e-vangelism. I interrogate both of these assumptions, suggesting alternative ways the Internet can be read; namely, that it does far more to construct the identity of a community internally than it provides a means of outreach. In other words, except for the occasional academic, few outsiders are visiting the Hell House websites. For the most part, they are made by and for people who already identify with the community. Christian teenagers go to see pictures of themselves or to watch the YouTube videos they and their friends made. Still, the Internet plays a role in constructing even those identities.

However, because the Internet is a site where those identities are both created and contested, I also examine a new media performance of Christian identity to illustrate the medium’s capacity to destabilize the performed identity and the narrative regarding the

medium's inherent neutrality. For this section, I conduct a close-reading of an Internet parody of Christianity called the Landover Baptist Church to explore the dynamics of individuals outside of a religious community commenting on and contributing to the shape of the religious community's identity by ridiculing more than the community's beliefs. The website derides many tenants and behaviors it perceives as indicative of "how Christians really are." Here, I focus on their material pertaining to Hell Houses. Throughout its extensive repertoire, the basis of every joke the Landover Baptist Church publishes online is a satirical critique of how Evangelical Christians use the Internet to proselytize. The parody website uses the medium that Christians employ to disseminate "truth" in order to exaggerate the identities performed on Christian websites; that way, the fake church can characterize such presentations (and the theology connected to them) as just as inauthentic and fake as the parody itself.

Because of the discourse of the medium's neutrality, Evangelical Christians noticing this parody will collapse it back into the dichotomy as a work of evil antagonism, further necessitating Christian participation in e-vangelism. However, this impulse and discourse ignores Campbell's notion of the RSST. Engaging with a technology that facilitates the performances found on both congregational websites and the Landover Baptist Church site shapes the social particularities of the religion-based community. To illustrate the impact of this process, I turn to one final form of new media performance: response videos made by *Nightmare* guests at the end of their Hell House experience. These videos were posted on YouTube immediately after they were recorded. They document over four thousand reactions that, ostensibly, serve as testimonials and advertisements for the Hell House in Tulsa. However, recording videos and using YouTube to broadcast them does not simply transmit the beliefs of the guests. The process and technology contribute to the construction of the community, its identity, and its

epistemological conceptualization of reality. The online parody and YouTube testimonials demonstrate the Evangelical Christian community's struggle to negotiate its relationship with a new media it utilizes to proselytize. The Internet, not unlike Hell Houses, reflects both a promising and a problematic space for proselytization and identity politics.

### **Conduits of E-vangelism, Religious-Social Shaping of Technology, and the Role of Social Capital in Identity Politics**

In this section, I review theories regarding the intersections between religion-based communities, new media technologies, and the process of identity formation and performance. I place a particular emphasis on Heidi Campbell's work in her book *When Religion Meets New Media* to employ her descriptions of the religious-social shaping of technology. This particular theory offers a means to explain the perspective Evangelical Christian communities have regarding new media like the Internet, namely that it is an inert conduit that does not impact or inform either the messages it conveys or the groups that use it. Additionally, the theory interrogates that perception critically and ecumenically. The point is not to cast religious communities, especially Evangelical Christians, in the role of "silly, ignorant fools that don't understand the technology they're using." Rather, it provides a way to observe and articulate the dynamics of a religious community's fairly quick embrace of new technologies, a study which might benefit other conversations regarding the interactions between different communities and forms of new media. Furthermore, it reevaluates the potentiality for their use of the Internet to impact the meaning of Hell Houses. If using the Internet to proselytize has the capacity to shape a religious community and its identity, then the Internet can inform the meaning of Hell Houses when the Internet is used to advertise or archive Hell Houses and Hell House experiences. After establishing the framework, I illustrate that while outreach constitutes a significant amount of the rhetoric justifying or championing the use of the Internet on the basis of proselytization, usage of

the Internet serves to reify existing beliefs and identities within the community more than to disseminate those beliefs and identities to those outside the community. The Internet may be discussed as being helpful to let people know about an upcoming Hell House, but creating and posting the advertisement ultimately does more to solidify the proselytical dimensions of the website manager's own Christian identity.

Before offering her theory to explore how religious communities negotiate their position with and use of certain technologies, Heidi Campbell outlines three lines of thought or assumptions religious communities tend to make about new media. Historically, within religious communities, media has generally been conceived as (1) a conduit, (2) a mode of knowing, or (3) a social institution.<sup>4</sup> Each perception tends to correspond with the group's behavior regarding new technology. The conduit approach is usually accompanied by an almost instantaneously embrace of the technology. Conversely, the mode knowing approach that assumes the technology completely shapes those who use it often results in resistance or rejection of the technology. And the perception of the new media as a social institution tends to result in some middle ground since it tends to produce a discourse based on how humans and communities respond to and shape the technology rather than foregrounding what the technology does for or to the community.

Given the proliferation of congregational websites, the Christian community's almost instantaneous embrace of the technology indicates that the group tends to fall into the first category. Campbell explains: "This outlook [that the technology is a conduit] promotes a very pro-technology discourse as religious groups can embrace new technology because it is the content that determines the nature of technology."<sup>5</sup> The conduit becomes a way to disseminate

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<sup>4</sup> Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

information and to contribute to proselytization. Appropriation of the technology also tends to generate unique religious genres. An example of this outcome on the Internet would be something like the creation of GodTube.com, a YouTube knock-off for Christian communities complete with inspirational messages and a higher amount of filtering than its secular counterpart.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the work of e-vangelism can work to get information out to people that are not members of the community, but it can also contribute to the generation of spaces specifically for members of the community. It can forge spiritual networks.

Campbell also mentions that the conduit model often encourages a community's use of the new media because the perception generates the outlook that the technology acts as an equalizing medium. According to this thought, the Internet does not have a culture and is a place where race, gender, and age do not exist or play a role in "seekers" finding information about God.<sup>7</sup> The conduit model proposes that new media simply makes information that already exists more accessible. Unlike the other two perceptions, it has no bearing on the role the technology might play in shaping that information. In this line of thought, the Hell Houses would happen whether or not the congregation used the Internet to advertise or archive it. They are independent of the Internet. However, as soon as the Internet is used in connection with a congregation's Hell House, the experience and meaning of the Hell House is potentially altered.

While it is important to bear in mind how the community perceives new technology and how that perception impacts the ways they use it or reject it, stopping there does not detail the negotiations that occur and how communities are impacted by the use of new media. Even groups like the Evangelical Christian community that quickly embrace something like the Internet participate in a process that shapes both their community and the technology itself. This

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<sup>6</sup> John Metcalfe, "GodTube, Where Networking is More Spiritual than Social," *New York Times* (New York, NY), May 12, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/12/business/media/12tube.html?scp=4&sq=God+and+Man+on+YouTube.&st=nyt>

<sup>7</sup> Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 45.

process is what Heidi Campbell refers to as the religious-social shaping of technology. This notion builds on previous work regarding the social shaping of technology (SST). According to this theory, “technology is seen as a social process and the possibility is recognized that social groups may shape technologies towards their own ends, rather than the character of the technology determining use and outcomes.”<sup>8</sup> The process asserts that the shaping of technology is an intricate process that includes more than a set amount of deterministic conditions.

It is not, then, that Evangelical Christians are wrong about the Internet being a neutral medium and that using the Internet automatically redefines their message, identity, and community in a set number of ways. Instead,

It [SST] puts emphasis on the need to explore issues of domestication, or how religious user communities shape media technologies so that they are in line with the moral economy of their community. It also highlights the need to consider how religious communities may inform certain uses of media technology or how individual innovators seek to inscribe meaning and value into the technologies they create for religious purposes.<sup>9</sup>

Framing the medium as neutral is part of that process of domestication. And the process of domestication or “culturing technology” is informed by the community’s moral economy. However, the effort to culture technology, in turn, impacts the moral economy. This is not unlike the conclusion of John Fletcher’s argument about Hell Houses in his article “Tasteless as Hell.” The requirement to think about and perform the lives of those outside of the community, or individuals with different “worldviews,” creates a space where thinking otherwise becomes a possibility. But that process of trying to think as those outside the community do impacts the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 53.

Christian individual's worldview. A moral economy informs how technology will be cultured, but that domestication of technology will in turn reassess the constitution of the community's moral economy.

Defining how SST works specifically within religious communities, Campbell outlines a framework for RSST so it can be used to analyze how such communities engage with media. She suggests that there are four core areas of investigation to consider: (1) the history and tradition of the community; (2) their core beliefs and patterns; (3) the negotiation process; and (4) communal framing and discourse.<sup>10</sup> For this project, I am most concerned with the last of these areas. For Christians, she says, there are three approaches to discourse prevalent in discussions regarding why the use of the Internet is appropriate: prescriptive discourse (there is a mandate from God to do so), officializing discourse (the use of the technology is talked about by authorities as something which solidifies the community's structures or goals), and validation discourse (technology serves the community and affirms communal identity). The discourse of the medium's neutrality does not come out of an official position, so it is more emblematic of type of prescriptive discourse and validation discourse.

Campbell suggests that both the use of technology and the language used to talk about the technology constitute acts of "value setting and boundary maintenance." In the final two sections of this chapter, I concentrate on the state and politics of those boundaries—first, how they are impacted by an intentional disruption incurred by a parodist and, then, how the community reaffirms those boundaries through YouTube testimonials. But before that discussion, it is significant to consider the dynamics between the rhetoric supporting e-vangelism and the behavior of Christians using the Internet. The use of the Internet for e-vangelism presents Christian identities to individuals and groups inside and outside of the community. However,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 60.



building communities online creates those identities through a reflexive process composed of the forces of identity construction and social capital.

According to Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman in their book chapter “Constructing Religious Identity on the Internet,” “social capital” is generated for an individual and in relation to others as “people interact on the basis of social trust.”<sup>11</sup> The more people interact, co-operate, and relate to one another, the greater the social capital. Social trust is also foundational to identity construction. Lövheim and Linderman argue that the construction of identity is an ongoing process between an individual and a social context. Alterations in social capital can impact someone’s identity and changes in identity can alter an individual’s social capital. Furthermore, social capital itself can be divided into two different categories: bonding and bridging social capital. The former refers to interactions within the group and the latter to networks established across social cleavages. In terms of the websites set aside specifically for Hell Houses, they are justified within the community’s discourse because of their presumed ability to facilitate the development of bridging social capital. However, the design and primary uses of the websites indicate they provide spaces where Christians can draw from and generate their own bonding social capital. Looking at the pictures, downloading the *Nightmare* app on iTunes, and watching the YouTube videos allows a member of the community to substantiate his or her identity as a “Christian”—an identity informed by how the dynamics of RSST shapes the new media and the community.

When the Evangelical community discusses the Internet, the rhetoric usually implies websites and cyberspace are spaces akin to a battlefield—the technology is a tool good and evil fight to control. This was the case in 2007 when a group of Christians responded to the atheist

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<sup>11</sup> Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman, “Constructing Religious Identity on the Internet,” *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 122.

website blasphemychallenge.com by organizing their own website called challengeblasphemy.com. Founded by a former Evangelical Christian by the name of Brian Flemming, Blasphemy Challenge started when Flemming invited people to post video testimonials on YouTube wherein participants denied the existence of God. Within the year, Challenge Blasphemy was set up similarly but with the intent to proclaim the existence of God. Flemming said of his efforts, “the goal is to dump religion from our culture;” whereas one of his opponents proclaimed,

We’re challenging them back. We are confident in God’s word and we would like to tell others to rethink their position. Despite all this, Jesus died for them and loves them.<sup>12</sup>

Though adversarial and in no way building bridges with each other, both websites reflect intentions to seek a type of bridging social capital, reaching out to individuals that are not part of their respective communities. This seems unsurprising considering the proselytical intent of evangelism. Yet while there are sites like these, congregational websites are far more indicative of the inward-focused bonding form of social capital.

One of the main reasons that Christians frequent religious websites is not to participate in the conversion of others but to reinforce their own faith and beliefs. This is a point discussed in Heidi Campbell’s book, Taleyna Morris’s dissertation “Amazing Grace in Cyberspace,” and other research. According to one study, this sentiment was either explicitly stated or implicitly echoed throughout a number of the highest ranked reasons people frequented Christian websites. The researcher behind the study, Michael Laney, concluded that for Christians “media usage

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<sup>12</sup> Rachel Mosteller, “Taking the Debate About God to an Online Battle, and Battling it Out with Videos” *New York Times* (New York, NY), February 17, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/17/us/17religion.html?scp=1&sq=taking%20god%20to%20an%20online%20battle&st=cse>.

becomes an act of affirming one's faith."<sup>13</sup> I am not saying that the Christian community does not utilize the Internet for proselytical purpose; they do: Christians set up blogs, forward inspirational emails, set up sites like Challenge Blasphemy to accumulate the bridging social capital to build relationships with individuals outside of the community.

However, when Christians use the Internet—despite the prescriptive discourses emphasis on using the Internet to proselytize—they use it to construct identities through bonding social capital. The websites I found functioned as a form of outreach by communicating to an outsider like me information that I might be interested, and congregational websites are partly designed for such proselytical purposes. But Talyena Morris's dissertation argues that congregational websites are primarily for individuals that are already within the community. The Internet is a medium not unlike Hell Houses: discussed and promulgated upon arguments of outreach but executed for and in behalf of the construction of reified identities for those that are already in the community.

The Evangelical Christian community rapidly embraced the use of the Internet as a new technology by employing a discourse of the medium's neutrality, by saying it was a conduit. That discourse prevailed upon the rhetoric of e-vaneglim. And the ability of the medium to redeem or corrupt necessitated its use. But the execution of the community's usage has not primarily been to proselytize but rather to re-identify. The Internet exists within the community because it provides a means and space for Evangelical Christians to build bridging social capital by performing their identities and beliefs for outsiders. The Internet *thrives* within the community because it provides a means and space for Evangelical Christians to build bonding social capital by performing their identities and beliefs for each other. The negotiation of this

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<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Laney, "Christian Web Usage: Motives and Desires," *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 172.

discrepancy contributes to the process of the religious-social shaping of technology within the community, revealing that the community needs, or at least utilizes, the discourse of neutrality to frame its community's use of new media. This particular framing shapes the community's domestication of the technology which, ostensibly, will communicate effectively who Christians really are.

### **Landover Baptist Church: Parodying the Presentation and Constructing Internet Identity**

In this section, I examine a Christian parody website called the Landover Baptist Church to highlight a non-Christian's perception and performance of contemporary Christian identity on the Internet. By conducting a close reading of the satirical material, I conclude that the underlying thread running through all of the website's jokes is a critical derision of the Christian's community of the Internet as a medium of proselytization. The Landover Baptist Church makes no effort to dilute their performance with subtlety or obfuscate their intentions with a straight-faced approach that makes it difficult to know whether or not their site is serious. Its criticism is overt. While one could argue the aesthetic of their humor lacks a refinement of craft, its effect is compelling. Ultimately, the parody presents its artificiality to such an extremity in order to parallel its own "fakeness" with that of the source material it mocks.

Landover Baptist Church tries to destabilize the "authenticity" of identities presented and performed on "real" Christian websites. According to Christians invested in the Internet's discourse of neutrality, this simply feeds back into a binary of good and evil. There is no perception that parodies like this impact how Christians use the Internet or how such engagement in turn affects their community and identity. In this section, I illustrate how an outsider's parody that strives to depict Christians as they "really are" fuels the discourse of a medium's neutrality within the Christian community. That, in turn, necessitates the use of the medium by that

community in order to combat a bad image and thereby communicate to outsiders who Christians really are.

Launched and operated by a man named Chris Harper, the Landover Baptist Church website purports to be the website of a Christian university (which is fake) in a town in Iowa (also fake) that is affiliated with the fabricated Landover Baptist Church. Harper often writes entries as a satiric persona known as Pastor Deacon Fred Smith, a character Harper also embodies not only in video performances on the website and YouTube but also in some live settings like atheist group gatherings. The website sells merchandise, much like the Christian subculture it ridicules, and it parodies many elements of Christian entertainment, including Hell Houses. The videos and posts about Hell Houses are as annual as the authentic productions. This satire parodies Hell Houses, and other inflammatory topics, in order to perform Christianity, not only reflecting a perception of contemporary Christianity but also contributing to the creation of that perception.

Despite the claims on website banners that the Landover Baptist Church has been “guaranteeing salvation since 1620” and “serving the saved since 1692,” copyrights and archives on the website indicate that the project is a bit younger than either the founding of the Plymouth colony or the execution of Salem witches. The earliest archived newsletter items date back to April 1999, though the site notes that newsletters from 1996 to March 1999 are archived somewhere offline.<sup>14</sup> The articles perform an exaggerated depiction of Christians who are judgmental and hypocritical. The image and identity the site presents echoes previous efforts by Chris Harper to deride Christians. In 1989, Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University expelled Harper allegedly for producing a satirical radio show that the administration found offensive. Harper

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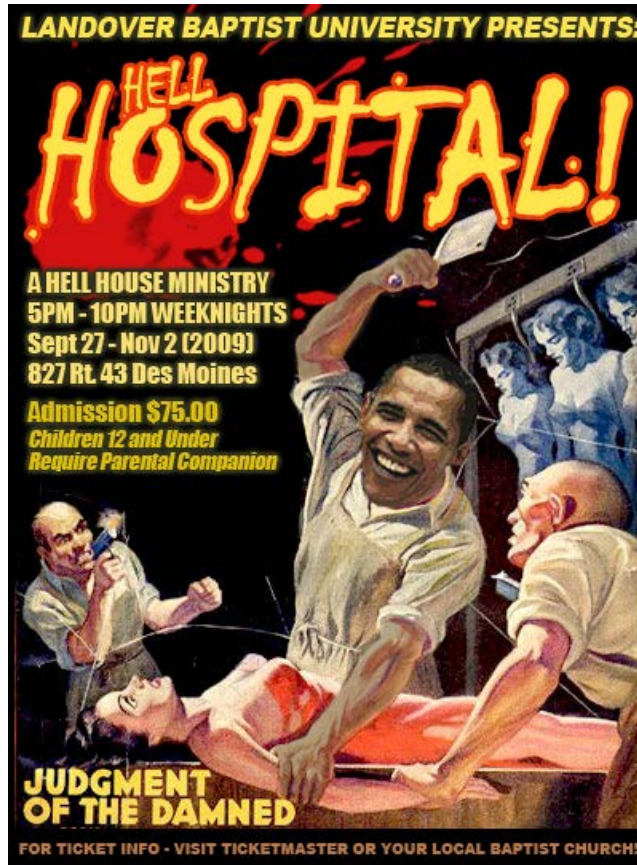
<sup>14</sup> “1999 Newsletter Archive,” *Landover Baptist Church*, accessed 15 Mar 2011, <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/subjectarchive/1999.html>

completed his education at George Mason University by 1993, three years prior to publishing the newsletter parodies and six before launching the website. In 2006, Harper, along with two colleagues, Andrew Bradley and Erik Walker, published a book called *Welcome to JesusLand! (Formerly the United States of America): Shocking Tales of Depravity, Sex, and Sin Uncovered by God's Favorite Church, Landover Baptist*. The paperback is basically a printed collection of the Landover Baptist Church's newsletters from 2005. Both texts contain an abundant amount of commentary on other religions or spiritual beliefs (e.g. Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam, and Wicca), the importance of creationism in school, the evils of homosexuality, explanations of appropriate biblical sexuality, and quite a few other social, political, and racial issues. The premise of the running joke is simple: Christians are self-righteous and ridiculous. However, the politics of the site explicitly detail the complexity and range of social issues Conservative Christians either participate in or want to. It is a two-dimensional representation of a persona and is invested in a fairly complex national community.

In 2009, the Landover Baptist Church posted a description of their *Hell Hospital*.<sup>15</sup> The promotional advertisement looks like an ad for a 1960s horror film (See Figure 4.1). It depicts President Obama in hospital scrubs, wielding a meat cleaver over a terrified woman on an operating table. Admission is set at \$75 a ticket. The accompanying article explains how the ministry will run in a renovated space outside of Des Moines. The article riffs on a number of markers meant to signify a Christian identity. While perusing the rest of the website, I quickly

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<sup>15</sup> To be honest, I stumbled upon the Landover Baptist Christian website while searching for evidence to confirm a theory I had based in fairly reductive supposition. Reading once that Hell Houses reflect and embody the politics of the mid-1990s when Conservative Christians played a significant role in the Republican Party's *Contract with America* campaign, I wanted to know how more recent politics might influence the content of Hell Houses. My internet searches for Hell Houses commenting on the Obama administration's health care reform efforts did not lead to a validation of my expectation; however, it did reveal that someone else had been thinking along similar lines; it just happened to be a parodist running a website.



**Figure 4.1.** Advertisement for fake *Hell Hospital* on Landover Baptist Church website.

learned each marker is a recurring theme and object of ridicule for the website. And these signifiers are greatly exaggerated. For example, the article starts,

Students at Landover Baptist University for the Saved will be presenting this year's Hell House in the Old Rocky Creek Sanatorium for Presumptuous Coloreds, an abandoned mental hospital [ . . . ] Landover Baptist acquired the property 87 years ago and has been using it to store Pastor's enormous collection of antique luxury cars.<sup>16</sup>

The website then jokes about how *Hell Hospital* would reveal the horrors of socialized medicine and the “Demoncrat’s” regime by keeping guests in the waiting room for four hours before

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<sup>16</sup> “Landover Baptist University for the Saved Opens Halloween Hell Hospital!”, *Landover Baptist Church*, accessed 13 September 2010, <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/2009/september/hellhouse2009.html>.

moving on to another room. It is perfectly designed to “give visitors a blood-curdling, authentic peek inside one of Obama's government-run hospitals.”<sup>17</sup> Part of the salvation room in the proposed *Hell Hospital* includes not only a prayer of salvation with a member of the Republican Party, but also an opportunity to “sign a letter of spiritual commitment to Christ and financial commitment to Landover Baptist Church.” Later references to Michelle Obama as the demonic “negress” in the mandatory abortion clinic, and students “painted to look like Mexicans [. . .] dancing around in sombreros and coughing into the faces of white children, passing on swine flu and Chlamydia” resist any measure of subtle commentary about racism being characteristic of Christian communities. Likewise, the \$75 admission fee and reference to expensive car collections repeatedly signify the economics of religion, attacking a perceived avarice endemic to organized Christian churches and colleges—an image fueled by a litany of famous financial controversies where religious leaders defrauded their congregants.

Hypocritical, judgmental, antihomosexual, political—the tenor of the parody and the list of behaviors satirized on Chris Harper’s website reads almost exactly in line with the components of the problematic image contemporary Christianity faces. Harper adds racist, greedy, unabashedly offensive, and extremely anti-Catholic to the list. But Harper’s website performs within a space designed to satirize not only Hell Houses and their content. Landover Baptist Church ridicules the very medium and space which Harper perceives Christians use to advertise, disseminate, comment on, advocate, and shape Hell Houses throughout the nation: the Internet. Harper’s parody highlights the role that the Internet plays in the creation and formation of Hell Houses while also attacking the impulse of Christians to use the Internet to perform their faith: in essence, critiquing this trend in “e-vangelism” as hypocritical, ridiculous, and potentially dangerous to society and individuals.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



The materials produced by Harper and his colleagues make their fabrication overtly self-evident. Their book contains the disclaimer, “The events and characters described in this book are fictitious. Certain real locations and public figures are mentioned, but all other characters and events described in the book are totally imaginary.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the website’s terms of service agreement explains, “The Landover Baptist Church is a complete work of fiction. It is a satire/parody.”<sup>19</sup> Oddly enough though, this admission is posted as a whited out statement; a viewer can only read it if he or she highlights a section of the page directly under the warning that reads, “Note: Mouse Over Below for Spoiler Alert.” But the existence of such a spoiler alert feels a bit unnecessary when there are animations advertising for T-shirts that can be purchased with words “Infidel” and “Evildoer” printed across the chest. Other website links include a flash animation of fire burning behind an encouragement to participate in a book burning with the statement “Jesus says, ‘Burn it! NOW!’” and a picture of a woman throwing something at the viewer as a phrase rests above her head: “God told me to hate you.”<sup>20</sup> Visitors can also purchase shirts, boxers, thongs, pins, mugs, greeting cards, clocks, bibs, aprons, stickers, and mousepads with “sadistic bible verses” printed on said items.<sup>21</sup> According to the site, “Sharing the horrors of God’s word has never been more fun!”<sup>22</sup> The parody could do little more in its approach and performative methodology to more explicitly showcase that it is not a “real” Christian website.

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<sup>18</sup> Chris Harper, Andrew Bradley, and Erik Walker, *Welcome to JesusLand! (Formerly the United States of America): Shocking Tales of Depravity, Sex, and Sin Uncovered by God's Favorite Church, Landover Baptist* (New York: Hachette Book Group USA, 2006), copyright page.

<sup>19</sup> “TOS: Terms of Service Agreement,” *Landover Baptist Church*, accessed 05 Mar 2011, <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/tos.html>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* The word “you” is underlined on the link so I chose to represent that here with its original emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Verses include Malachi 2:3 (“Behold, I will corrupt your seed, and spread dung upon your faces.”), Ezekiel 23:20 (“There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses”), and 1 Timothy 2: 12-15 (“Suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence.”)

<sup>22</sup> “Sadistic Bible Verse Gear,” *Landover Baptist Store*, accessed 07 Mar 2011, <http://www.cafepress.com/landoverbaptist/75553>.

It is helpful to consider this aesthetic approach to parody and new media performance in the context of the previous section's discussion of Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman's theory regarding the construction of identity and social capital. The hyperbolic presentation of the performed identity disrupts any possibility of trust forming between Harper's persona and a viewer of the website. The persona of Pastor Deacon Fred Smith and its characteristics are readily identifiable as fake. Yet Harper is not simply constructing an identity on the Internet; he is constructing an identity through the internet. As exaggerated as his performed identity may be, his consistency with the parameters of that role—maintaining the satire for over a decade—itself creates a degree of steady trust and social capital. Whether people are purchasing t-shirts, hiring Harper to speak in character at their conference, hitting either the like button or dislike button while judging his YouTube videos, or writing disgruntled emails about his entire project, the more people interact with his website and character the greater the relationship and report between his identity and his networks of supporters and detractors. Chris Harper gains trust and social capital, building a “reliable” or “authentic” identity by undermining Pastor Deacon Fred Smith's social capital; which Harper does by overtly presenting Smith as a fabrication or “inauthentic” personality. The Smith character is Harper's representation of Christians—specifically Christians on the Internet. The representation performs the “inauthenticity” or “fakeness” of the very Christians it is parodying.

Chris Harper and the Landover Baptist Church's constructed identities become more defined through more interactions. Lövheim and Linderman explain, “even in a ‘body-less’ context like the Internet, identity construction still seems to be a *social* process—a process taking place in relation to other individuals.”<sup>23</sup> Technically, there is no way of knowing the size of Chris Harper's audience for these articles; however, Harper did start making videos in 2007 in

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<sup>23</sup> Lövheim and Linderman, “Constructing Religious Identity on the Internet,” 121, original emphasis.

which he has performed his Pastor Deacon Fred Smith persona. The videos have been posted on the Landover Baptist Church website and on YouTube. The YouTube account does provide some interesting figures: Harper's 30 uploaded videos have been viewed over 837,000 times, collectively, and his YouTube channel has about 2600 subscribers. On Facebook, 600 people like the website and Pastor Deacon Fred has almost 5000 friends. Moreover, in 2001, a website called "Objective: Ministries" was launched, about two years after Harper launched the Landover Baptist Church website. The Objective: Ministries website states that it started with the goal to organize an effort to shut down the Landover Baptist Church website for spreading anti-Christian rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> It turns out that Objective: Ministries is, itself, a parody Christian website—a fake Christian website set up to "try to shut down" a fake Christian website. The identities associated with and performed on the Landover Baptist Church website have been participating in some process of identity construction as discussed by Lövheim and Linderman.

While Evangelical Christians no doubt spend limited if any time considering the impact of Chris Harper or his parody, that does not mean his effort (however limited) is not affecting their community and its relationship with the Internet. With the dichotomous worldview, for them, Harper is inspired by the devil—further proof that they need to use the Internet to share with outsider who Christians "really are." And that is the joke behind the Objective: Ministries project to shutdown Harper's site. Harper's parody, the Landover Baptist Church, ridicules the behaviors and beliefs of Christians, but ultimately its Internet performance of Christianity is the most damaging because it destabilizes the notion that Internet proselytization necessarily signifies or indicates a real and substantive faith. It undermines their social capital. Sharing testimonials and faith-based personas on the Internet is reducible to a set of identity markers; as

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<sup>24</sup> Jim Carlson, "Objective: Landover Baptist Shutdown," *Objective: Ministries*, accessed 07 Mar 2011, <http://objectiveministries.org/shutdown/>

long as those markers are present, the essence or faith doesn't necessarily need to be, and it will still be read as "Christian." In terms of identity politics, the Landover Baptist Church reflects an outsider's perception of Christianity; contributes to the generation, perpetuation, and proliferation of that identity; but most of all, it dialogues with and disrupts a medium contemporary Evangelical Christians are turning towards to spread the gospel to all the world. In the process of the religious-social shaping of technology, these are the circumstances the Evangelical Christian community must consider as it negotiates its relationship with the Internet.

### **At the End of the *Nightmare*: "Real" Testimonials through YouTube Proselytization**

In this final section, I return to the *Nightmare* Hell House in Tulsa to examine one specific way a church in the Evangelical Christian community uses the Internet to proselytize. At the end of *Nightmare*, guests are invited to share their experiences, thoughts, feelings and reactions by recording a video of themselves and posting it on YouTube. I recognize the import of Heidi Campbell's theory regarding the religious-social shaping of technology *and* the destabilization of Christian Internet identities engendered by Chris Harper's parody. Under these circumstances, I demonstrate how the creation of YouTube testimonials still positions the Internet as a neutral conduit that the Evangelical community uses in order to create an image of who Christians really are. In a way similar to the verbal conversations discussed in the previous chapter, the Internet videos hope to convey a depiction of what Christians are "really like" for outsiders. Posting the reactions into a space where the videos of Chris Harper and Blasphemy Challenge exist, Guts Church seeks to reclaim YouTube and the Internet for Christ in a way that generating an insular performance site like GodTube.com approaches differently.

The content of the videos mostly consist of what one might expect from live recordings of large groups of adolescents coming out of a haunted house type of attraction who are invited

to share their experiences and immediate reactions on YouTube. These are not the testimonials of theologians. Most videos contain teenagers more preoccupied with the idea about being on the Internet than saying anything more than a tangential thought inspired by the production. A few are a bit more reflective or heartfelt. The most common statement made is a recommendation for the watcher of the video to make sure they come to the *Nightmare* if they haven't. Other recurring statements pertain to how real it was, how well it depicted what teenagers go through in real life, how important having Christ in your life is, and how scary the *Nightmare* was. Occasionally, there is a video where someone shares a story from his or her own life, witnesses about the importance of Christ in greater detail, or does both. But each of these is less common than other statements, mostly because the videos simply are not that long. Most range between one or two minutes, but there are quite a few that are only about 30 seconds. And then, there are some closer to four or five minutes long.

In 2010, there was a promotional incentive from Guts Church to make a YouTube video: making a video offered you a chance to enter your name into a raffle to win an iPad. The iPad enticement was advertised on the YouTube channel for "NightmareTulsa" as well as the website for *Nightmare* ([nighmaretulsa.com](http://nighmaretulsa.com)), which is separate website from the main Guts Church website ([gutschurch.com](http://gutschurch.com)). The separate *Nightmare* website, with a link on the main page, is also the easiest means of finding the YouTube testimonial videos—a fact discussed more fully below. When I attended in 2010, it was only the second year that *Nightmare* had this testimonial feature; or at least, the YouTube account for the "NightmareTulsa" user only has material archived back to 2009. In those two years, Guts Church has posted about 4200 videos which have been watched, collectively, over 137,000 times. There are twelve videos that have been viewed over 1,000 times each; one ten second video boasts over 4,000 views. And there are many others that

have been watched hundreds of times; however, for the most part, many of the videos—assuming they have been watched at all—average between 20 or 30 views.

The sound quality often suffers. Usually, that's because the person making the video is talking over other people who are leaving. From what I can tell from the videos, the groups interfering with the sound recording mostly consisted of teenagers screaming or talking loudly. Overall, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish what is being said. And as mentioned above, the *Nightmare* website contains a link to the YouTube videos. Other than that, however, finding the testimonials is fairly difficult unless you know what you are looking for, but even it can take some time. Before I realized there was a link, I looked for the recordings on YouTube and had a very difficult time finding it. I have wondered why Guts Church puts forth so much effort to set up so many computers to get such a mixed bag of results.

From an outsider's perspective, the YouTube videos appear to be part of a tool for proselytization that somewhat fails due to an ineffective execution of resources. It is just too difficult for someone who is not a member of the community to find the videos and proselytization is usually concerned with getting the message to someone who is not looking anyway. But based on promotional quality of the iPad offer, the comments made by most people, and where the computers are placed in the structure of the experience, I still maintain that the intended purpose of the videos is proselytical in nature.

The invitation to make a YouTube video comes directly after the prayer tent Guts Church sets up at the end of the *Nightmare*. As mentioned in Chapter Two, in his article on Hell Houses, Brian Jackson refers to that space as “a unique variation of the traditional evangelical altar call.”

<sup>25</sup> In the prayer tent, guests were asked if they would accept being prayed over, a prayer to

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Jackson, “Jonathan Edwards Goes to Hell (House),” 55. In the fourth chapter of his dissertation, Robert Henry Willenbrink discusses this exchange at length, theorizing the moment to a “theological performative.” See

prepare the guest to accept Christ and His will into his or her heart. It is the pinnacle moment where a Hell House creates the potential for what Hank Willenbrink terms a “theological performative”—the confessional speech act that transforms one faith. It is a moment that is important for those who have never participated in such a prayer; however, as stated in Chapter Two, it is also significant of people making recommitments to Christ. Guts Church sets up computers for the newly converted and returning sheep to immediately share the effect of that transformative moment to outsiders on the Internet. The YouTube computers are extensions of the prayer tent and alter call to elicit more theological performatives. They are designed to be a space where new Christians or “return-from-a-backsliding-lifestyle” Christians can present their faith and perform nascent Christianity—a new, born-again, pure expression of faith, belief, and religion. In other words, Christianity as it really is.

These videos are not posted on GodTube.com; putting them on YouTube instead indicates intent for these videos to be seen by outsiders rather than people that already believe. Guts Church is loading their videos into a space where Chris Harper uploads satirical derision and a resident of Arizona shares his video “Phoenix church-owned Hell House says ‘faggot’ openly in haunted house called Final Destination IV.” The space of YouTube is seen as part of the Internet battlefield that’s divided by Blasphemy Challenge and Challenge Blasphemy. To Evangelical Christians, engaging with YouTube or the Internet as a whole does not impact their message or their community because the medium is inert; it is only a conduit. Outsiders may spread lies or derisive representations of the faith, but using the Internet for that purpose does not taint the Internet itself. But as Heidi Campbell points out, using the Internet and other new media does impact the community and their moral economy.

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Robert Henry Willenbrink, “Scaring the Jesus into You: American Hell Houses in Performance” (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2009).

This does not mean faith-based communities reject their beliefs when new technologies emerge or resist new forms of media based on their beliefs: the process is one of negotiation where the technology shapes the community and the community shapes the technology. Using the Internet facilitates the church's efforts to advertise and e-vangelize; however, identities are also molded and created through processes of interactions. Christianity gets a new image when Chris Harper posts an article about the next Obama-themed Hell House. Christianity's image shifts again when Guts Church starts posting YouTube testimonials. Those inside and those outside the community participate in a conversation that shapes who Christians "really are" as they both present and represent an identity that is neither fixed nor stable. The Internet is a space where that dialogue and conversation can occur because videos and responses can be posted as soon as the next person is done walking through a Hell House. The Evangelical Christian community negotiates its use of the Internet by employing a discourse surrounding the medium, describing it as neutral and a gift from God—both characteristics mandate its use. But its use requires the community to reconsider its moral economy, its boundaries, and its identity. The Internet, not unlike Hell Houses, constitutes a promising and a problematic space for proselytization and identity politics.



## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

When the two hour performance of *Hell Night* concluded at the Praise Chapel in Kansas City, the event did not end for about another hour. After the devil was judged by God and dragged to Hell by God's angels, Pastor Kelley Lohrke came out and led a presentation explaining that what we saw in no way compared to either the real horrors of Hell that face the proud or the real glories of Heaven offered through Christ. Eventually, his comments led to an altar call, an invitation for anyone who felt the spirit to approach the stage and pray with church volunteers. However, before that altar call, Lohrke commented on the significance and the reality of the awful sins we saw that night. I found it interesting that the entire presentation was underscored. A type of kitschy ethereal and spiritualistic music one might expect at a contemporary Christian church service worked not only to make his presentation more cinematic—like it was a sermon in a summer blockbuster film—but it also influenced the cadence of his delivery. He took pauses that corresponded with the rhythm and he spoke faster at times when the music became more intense. In a significant way, even though *Hell Night* ended, the performance didn't.

About halfway through his post-show sermon, the stage reopened to reveal Christ bleeding on the cross. Like with Guts Church's *Nightmare*, the Christ in *Hell Night* was portrayed by a real actor. This effectively differentiated the living representation of Christ from the inanimate and pre-recorded representation of the Throne of God used through most of the production. The appearance of Christ had happened one time before towards the end of the show, during the judgment scene of Floozy Suzy—a prostitute that came from an abusive home but who died without accepting the message of Christ. But when it happened during the post-show

sermon, Pastor Lohrke suggested that it was up to us whether or not we would accept his sacrifice and salvation.

In ways, perhaps quite different from many other Hell Houses, *Hell Night* blended live performance and mediated performance almost equally. Demons, angels, and sinners walked around and talked, delivering lines into microphones; however, the event depended on pre-recorded voices and videos of the sinners' lives. *Hell Night* even started with a preamble video from a teenager named Josh who died in a car accident and went to Hell because he never accepted Christ. The video was a letter from Hell to a Christian friend named Mike. As the audience heard a male teenager's voice narrating or reading the letter, words appeared on the screen above the Throne of God that other videos were shown on throughout the rest of the production. Josh chillingly described how terrible the pain, agony, and terror of his life in Hell was and wondered why Mike never told him about Christ. The video (and letter) ended with Josh's post-script, "Wish you were here." The audience literally shuddered. And then there was footage from a number of horror films including *Hellraiser* and *Thirteen Ghosts* projected on the same screen before the live performance portion of the show began.

During each judgment throughout the night, the Word of God played a significant role in shaping the dramaturgy of the production. The Word of God was always delivered through these audiovisual mediums. Whenever the Devil interrupted a sinner's gloating to throw him or her into the white circle of judgment, the Throne of God would start by asking the sinner what he or she did with His Son, Jesus. God was represented by an inanimate, large golden chair at the top of some stairs and His deified glory was represented by a rotating light emanating from the Throne. It was reminiscent of a rotating disco light; as God talked, the light would turn clockwise or counter-clockwise so it seemed like it was in sync with the vibrations of God's voice.

Answers to the question about what each person “did with Jesus” varied depending on the sinner. But after each response the following video of that person’s life, the voice of God would say, “It is written,” and a relevant scripture would follow. Like in the preamble video with Josh, as God recited the scripture, the words appeared on the screen with the Biblical reference. God would ask the female angel overseeing a giant golden book on a raised platform covered in cotton clouds at stage right if the sinner’s name was written in the Book of Life. Ten out of eleven times, she responded, “It is not, Lord.” That cued God’s banishment of that individual to Hell.

The Word of God was mediated. The scriptures were projected onto a screen and a pre-recorded voice recited them. More than that, a part of the Book of Life, another record of the Word of God, was also mediated. The Book of Life is discussed a number of times in the Book of Revelation. Its meaning is a point of debate but often is described as a record of an individual’s life. The female angel read from a literal book whether or not each individual’s name was in the Book of Life, evidence that they had accepted salvation through Christ; however, the video depicting each life and permutation of sin by which the person was judged by God was also a mediated version of the Word of God.

*Hell Night* revealed that contemporary Christians perceive doctrinal ideas through the media that is available. It only becomes conceivable that judgment day consists of watching videos of our lives from a third person perspective with the popular advent of film. The media and its availability have informed how the community perceives what could be interpreted as the actions that will occur on judgment day. However, more significantly, using both media and live performance to represent God, the Devil, Heaven, and Hell depends on a number of interesting choices that reflect and shape theological beliefs. For example, when each sinner watched their video, the live performer acted as though they could feel what they had felt at the time depicted

in the video. If the video depicted some form of perverse or promiscuous pleasure, the sinner seemed to enjoy the feeling again. And if the video showcased the use of drugs, the live performer acted like they were under the influence of that particular drug as well. There was a notion that the memories they were watching were presented with were relived with greater clarity and intensity. When the memories shifted to pain, depression, and anger, those experiences were also amplified. This balance between keeping the center of the performance on both the film and the live actor was intriguing and it might have roots in some Biblical scripture; however, it certainly is creating and shaping the very idea of what the experiences of Judgment Day and Hell are like. Describing the relationship between religious communities and the Internet, Heidi Campbell wrote, “The Internet allows devotees to live out their religious vision in innovative ways that suggest it provides a powerful space to bring together the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ sides of religious eschatology.”<sup>1</sup> The convergence of media and live performance in *Hell Night* created a similar space. That intersection, in turn, informed the shape of both the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ within Praise Chapel’s eschatology.

*Hell Night* was not the only Hell House to use other forms of media in their para-theatrical presentation. Hell Houses, mediums of proselytization themselves, are comprised of many other mediums as well. In this thesis, I have sought to discuss some of them; however, it did not touch on many of the implications of the use of audiovisual media within Hell Houses. As mentioned *Hell Night* projected images from contemporary Hollywood horror films. *Final Destination* did the same thing by showing clips from *Saw* and *The Passion of the Christ*. Guts Church’s *Nightmare* concluded their performance by projecting a recording of their pastor. That choice probably came out of a utilitarian decision: it was just easier to wrap up the *Nightmare* experience and prepare audiences for the final room by creating a repeatable message. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 25.

the contrast of a mediated, real pastor who also delivers sermons that can be heard on the Guts Church website with the present but fake pastor in the final room of the Hell House contributed to the meaning of the room. The present pastor was fake because he was an actor and, more importantly, because “real” Christians do not condemn sinners to Hell without preaching about the hope in Christ—that would be unChristian. The constitutive role of audiovisual media within Hell Houses has not yet been explored and is just one of many avenues open for further study. While I did not address the range of implications of media within drama ministries like Hell Houses here, my discussion regarding mediums of proselytization and the discourse of neutrality may offer insights and vocabulary that can facilitate such discussions in the future.

In this thesis, I have explored the role of some of the mediums of proselytization within contemporary American Evangelical Christian communities. The various mediums in or related to Hell Houses, as well as Hell Houses themselves, contribute to the presentation, representation, and generation of contemporary US American Evangelical Christian identities. I designed each chapter to interrogate what I refer to as “the discourse of neutrality.” This discourse is employed to justify the use of mediums that are designed to facilitate conversions. Interrogating the assumptions that the mediums are neutral illustrated the role that mediums of proselytization play in creating identities. Tools of proselytization seemingly exist to help individuals cross boundaries of identity politics, passing from without to within. However, the very act of proselytization necessitates the erection and definition of boundaries that differentiate members of the community from those who are not members.

From various perspectives, in each chapter, I investigated the dynamics between a medium of proselytization and these elements of identity politics. Each investigation contributes to an understanding of contemporary Evangelical Christian communities and how they perform

their own identities to themselves and to those outside of their community. I have framed the argument about the neutrality of various mediums of proselytization within a larger discussion concerned with community and identity politics. So, now there is a framework to investigate the active role that audiovisual media plays in creating meaning and identities in a Hell House.

Focusing on the medium of Hell Houses provided the opportunity and context for me to discuss other mediums of proselytization such as physical bodies, verbal conversations or presentations of self, and new media resources like the Internet. The utilization of each of these mediums as a means of proselytization occurs within a discourse of neutrality that justifies and often necessitates the usage of that particular medium. According to the discourse, Haunted Houses, physical bodies, verbal conversations, and the Internet are inherently neutral: they can be the vehicles by which ideas are expressed or shared while the mediums are passive in the creation of meaning.

In her book *When Religion Meets New Media*, Heidi Campbell suggests the creation of a discourse to justify or explain the use of new media is one of the final stages of a process she calls the religious-social shaping of technology (RSST). Her efforts reflect on previous encounters between religious communities and forms of new media (in fact, she states that looking at how religious communities have previously responded to new forms of media is imperative to studying interactions between religious communities and innovations in technology); however, she still focuses mostly on how religious communities have recently responded to the emergence of the Internet.

While Chapter Four in my thesis benefits from this concentration, the other efforts in examining how Evangelical Christians negotiate their relation to using Hell Houses, physical bodies, and verbal conversations also benefited from examining the final stage of discourse

creation and usage that Campbell outlines in the RSST process. In future research regarding the use of media in Hell Houses, it would be beneficial to more fully investigate the moments where congregations producing a Hell House make decisions and choices about the appropriate use of media. Exploring those moments and the significance of those choices would also benefit from examining how the RSST process is operating within the community.

Each medium of proselytization contributes to the creation of messages and their meanings, a process which challenges or resists the discourse of neutrality while still seeming to function within the discourse. Looking at Hell Houses and the other mediums within or adjacent to Hell Houses revealed a pattern of power connected to the recurring discourse of neutrality. Framing mediums as neutral provides a cultural power inasmuch as it justifies the usage of the medium. Because the medium is neutral, that means anyone can use it—good or evil, God or the devil, authentic Christians and unChristian Christians. The dichotomy of a medium’s potentiality necessitates its usage. Arguably, the devil will use Haunted Houses, physical bodies, and the Internet to deceive people and lead them to sin. So, believers in God must then combat for ownership of those mediums so the devil does not claim anymore territory or souls. The binarized cosmology contributes to the argument for the usage of the mediums but then the very usage of the medium reifies the dichotomies.

Perhaps more significantly, the implementation of the discourse of neutrality and the utilization of corresponding mediums procures a voice of authenticity to determine the legitimate definitions of “reality” and “true” Christian identities. The mediums do more than convey meanings or shape the meanings of the messages conveyed: they create reality—a perceived reality of the cosmos. In Chapter One, I started by sharing my own experience with proselytization and a utilization of para-theatrical conventions. Basically, I created a Mormon

“Plan of Salvation” House out of someone’s home while I served as an LDS missionary in Oregon. At the time, I did not consider how the medium of my presentation would generate significant meanings and possible “realities” as proselytical representations.

Leaving the outside property of the house but before entering the living room of the home, I stood with five other people in a tiny, enclosed, unventilated mini-porch in front of the front door. The idea was that the room would serve as a nice liminal space to depict the LDS belief in the Spirit World—a space everyone (good or evil) temporarily resides in after death but before a physical resurrection. We were no longer alive (or outside of the house) but our journey wasn’t over (or inside the house) either. The liminal space, that Spirit World—it’s temporary, transitory, like a porch. I did not consider how the tiny, stuffy, enclosed space would be quite so uncomfortable in the afternoon of a summer day in a high desert climate. It did not occur to me that that particular space would amplify some unintentional similarities between the Spirit World and a Catholic belief in Purgatory. I failed to recognize how my representation reflected my own understandings of what an abstract “Spirit World” might be like, but the performance also created a particular image of that abstraction for the investigators I was trying to teach. I thought the medium would simply highlight how things really are in life for the potential converts. The medium actually contributed to the construction as well as the conveyance of the reality I tried imparting.

My goal was to teach two Christians how things really were. To me, there was a perception that there was a measure of inauthenticity to their Christianity and my Mormon “Salvation House” could fix that because it would simply present truth as it was. Because the mediums of proselytization do contribute to the generation of meaning, they shape the boundaries by which “real” Christians are defined. Using a Hell House to show teenagers the



eternal consequences of drunk driving or abortion creates that causal reality for the actors and the audience members. Likewise, the verbal conversations which are posited by new paradigm Evangelical Christians convey how people really are inasmuch as the presentations of self are actually creating what it means to be a Christian in the moment of the presentation and performance. Mediums of proselytization provide what Richard Shechner has called “restored behaviors.” Restored behaviors have the capacity to reshape how things have been or “how they really are” within a community.

Applying the discourse of neutrality to particular mediums of proselytization validates the reality constructed and depicted by that medium. The discourse contributes to and relies upon a jargon of authenticity that produces and masks the production of power dynamics. Employing the discourse and using the medium, in turn, creates a reality which can be used to determine authentic identities: in other words, whether or not someone who says he or she is a Christian is, in fact, “really” a Christian. In Chapter Four, I started to look at how using the Internet by posting YouTube videos has shaped Hell House experience of *Nightmare* patrons—they are able to perform their real Christian identities as soon as they leave the prayer tent. I did not address other ways other forms of audiovisual media have shaped Hell House experiences and the subsequent composition of Christian identities.

The tools of proselytization seek to facilitate the conversion of others; however, while reaching out, the very act of proselytization erects boundaries that inform the identity politics of a community. Hell Houses constitute spaces where some Evangelical Christians are able to perform their faith with the intent to engender conversion, but they perform a type of Christianity. It is not the Christianity of David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons; yet, it is also not the Christianity of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church either. To each group or subsection

of Evangelical Christianity, their preferred medium of proselytization or instruction—be it Hell Houses, verbal conversations, or funerary protesting—ostensibly helps to convey “how things really are,” thereby providing a degree of authenticity to their definition of a “true” Christian identity.

Hell Houses are complicated spaces of identity creation and performance. Conversations around their appropriateness and the image of contemporary Christianity they create generate more space in which Christian identities are created and performed. I examined the roles a number of mediums of proselytization play in shaping how various pockets of the Evangelical Christian community perceive reality, their own identity, and the identities of the outsiders they are attempting to convert. The Hell House approach, as a contested proselytical medium itself, offers a site with a number of vantage points to engage in discussions regarding how authenticity, identity, and performativity operate differently when viewed from within the community, outside the community, and in the liminal thresholds.

I explored these three latter spaces through three different mediums of proselytization connected to Hell Houses. In Chapter Two, I detailed how physical bodies (of actors and audience members) function within Hell Houses as way to consider how an “authentic” Christian identity is created and presented within and to the community itself. In Chapter Three, I considered the rise of new paradigm evangelism’s emphasis on verbal conversations and “real” presentations of self as an alternative to approaches like Hell Houses. This medium of proselytization operates within an awareness of how individuals outside of the Evangelical community perceive Christians. New paradigm evangelism is marked by a conscious performance of “self” to the perceived concerns of outsiders who might find Christianity unChristian. In Chapter Four, I examined a space where Christians and outsiders can both

perform Christian identities: the Internet. The final medium, namely new media, demonstrates how the Evangelical Christian community utilizes and relates to a medium that both purports and destabilizes the identities created in cyberspace. Each of these mediums, including Hell Houses, is used because each is framed and informed by a discourse of neutrality. That discourse necessitates the use of the medium in question and masks the constitutive capacity of each medium.

Despite the discourse employed, the mediums of proselytization do actively contribute to the meaning of the community's message as well as the community's identity. Sometimes, that active role can be the means by which the reality that the medium and the discourse are based on is created; however, the medium can also destabilize meanings and identities. As Ann Pellegrini aptly stated, in Hell Houses, the very medium of theatre can "queer the pitch" of the Evangelical Christian's anti-homosexual message. On the one hand, as far as the physical body is concerned, when someone vomits or cries in response to a Hell House, his or her body and its reactions are interpellated into a system that codes the body's reactions as proof that Hell Houses are indeed depicting things as they really are. The medium creates the reality as it presents the veracity of that reality. On the other hand, when a body experiences arousal when viewing images and bodies engaged in activities demarcated as "sinful behaviors," the body acts (and can be read as) a complicated space of resistance.

Ann Pellegrini mentions how teenagers who experience pleasure and interest in the depiction of homosexuality can be considered as example of times when the very performativity of a Hell House works against the efforts of the Hell House to deter such interests. For Chapter Two, I built on her idea and explored how situations in Hell Houses might prompt heterosexual arousal while trying to dissuade the very sexuality they are representing. By suggesting that in

such moments Hell Houses queer heterosexuality, I discussed how the medium of proselytization depends on but also generates the sexual politics of the community.

In Chapter Three I interrogated the passivity of simple one-on-one conversations. For new paradigm Evangelical Christians interested in the soft-sell approach, the adage “just be yourself” is more than advice: it’s a tactic. Arguably, the idea is to get rid of tactics, to stop treating evangelism and conversion like a war and simply live out the faith. But this notion of “being yourself” operates within an awareness of shifting cultural tides. One leader, Gabe Lyons, argues that we live in a post-Christian America. The research of David Kinnaman suggests that the tactics of mass conversion, which Hell Houses are emblematic of, are far more detrimental than they are helpful to the process of spreading Christianity. And beyond that, the conversations outsiders have had with Christians have left outsiders with bitter experiences. In short, Christianity has an image problem.

The “reimagined evangelism” of Rick Richardson or the “evangelism without additives” of Jim Henderson where evangelism becomes a one-on-one verbal conversation without grandeur or much effort presumably functions on “just being yourself.” It depends upon an idea of authenticity. Yet there is a certain shape to what kind of self that Lyons, Kinnaman, Richardson, and Kinnaman all suggest to present: one flawed but helped by Christ. This Christian identity is not one that has existed since the dawn of Christianity—it is deeply rooted in a response to negative outsider perceptions of Christianity. The “flawed but working on it” persona that is presented as a relaxed, authentic presentation of self constitutes a contemporary Christian identity when Evangelical Christians engage in this new paradigm evangelism. The very discourse that advocates for this approach and the use of this medium of proselytization (1)

positions the medium as neutral to the creation of “authentic Christianity” and (2) masks the power play it makes to control what an “authentic” Christian identity is.

In Chapter Four, I discussed the role of new media in connection to Hell Houses. The Internet is seen by Evangelical Christians as a neutral space where the battle between good and evil continues. Because the medium is perceived as a binary, it appears neutral; using the Internet to proselytize, therefore, should not affect the Evangelical Christian community or its identity. Yet, whenever a community engages with a new technology, both it and the technology are shaped by the exchange. The Internet is a space where Evangelical Christians can perform their own faith for outsiders through congregational websites, blogs, or leaving comments on various websites. Presenting or performing their faith on the Internet allows Christians to build what Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman refer to as “social capital”—when people trust the image they are presenting.

However, the Internet is also a space where a parodist can also perform a satirical visage of Christianity. Chris Harper’s website Landover Baptist Church ridicules not only the beliefs of contemporary Christians but also their use of the Internet as a means of proselytization. His parody is, at times, so over the top that it is almost impossible to mistake it for “real” Christianity; however, that consistency, itself, generates a degree of social capital with visitors to his website. They know he is not a real Christian, but they can laugh and agree with his performance of Christians “how they really are.” And part of that performance mocks how Christians use the Internet so it disrupts the social capital Christians try to accrue in their proselytizing efforts on the Internet. The medium destabilizes the performed identity.

This does not deter the community because it reifies the belief that the Internet is inherently neutral but simply being used for good and for evil. The community shapes the

technology by creating sites like GodTube.com and ChallengeBlasphemy.com, but the technology also shapes the community. *Nightmare* now includes the opportunity for its guests to proselytize through YouTube. This use of the Internet creates the experience and idea that being a Christian means sharing your experiences and your faith—and the Internet is one venue for that performance or exchange.

I am interested in Hell Houses as a drama ministry—a para-theatrical performance that is used to bring people to a faith in Jesus Christ. Drama ministries depend upon a faith in Christ's divinity; however, they also rely on a remarkable faith in performance. Hell Houses have been discussed primarily as performative practices by scholars working from theater and performance studies points of view. While my thesis is no different in that regard, it is clear that Hell House scholarship can be expanded by researching and examining the use of media implemented in and around Hell Houses. Websites that advertise for Hell Houses often operate separate from the congregational websites of the churches that produce them.

There is a trend for amplifying the fright element of Hell Houses by subjecting audiences to clips of Hollywood horror films. Pre-recordings of voices facilitate in the generation of a codified experience that destabilizes the ephemeral quality of theatrical performances. Hell Houses can be a performance where you can almost reproduce the experience exactly each time the vignette is performed so that the drama ministry exists in some liminal space between theatre and film. I look forward to further research that can be conducted regarding the use of technology and media in Hell Houses and how that relates to other drama ministries, regular church services, and sermons posted on congregational websites. This study of the mediums of proselytization and the discourse of neutrality that surrounds such mediums offers an apparatus to use in approaching such research. The mediums may differ; however, the ideas regarding the

inherent neutrality of the media, authentic identities of the members of the community, and the necessity to show outsiders how things really are will likely present themselves again. This is especially true in research concerned with how an evangelical community negotiates its position and identity in relation to new technology and its own desire to proselytize its faith.

Appendix A:  
Field Notes for *Nightmare XVIII* in Tulsa, Oklahoma

Date: Friday, 08 October 2010

Location: Tulsa, Oklahoma

Venue: Guts Church

Tonight, I went to *Nightmare* at the Guts Church. I'll start at the top. I walked there; it was about a 40 minute walk. When I got there, I started to see some things that were clicking in to earlier questions that I had: when I was reading through Pastor Keenan Roberts' Hell House kit, he talked about distinguishing volunteers—especially in matters of people who were security, to indicate who was security and who else was volunteering. So basically they did it through different colored shirts. People who were volunteering to help with parking wore orange shirts; general volunteers wore white shirts; and security mostly all wore black shirts. There were people standing guard while you're moving through the line, they were wearing white, but people who were labeled as security, they were in all black. And I'll talk about the security guards more a little later. I'm just going to go through this chronologically.

I went up around the building and went to will call to get my ticket. I had purchased it online so they had it waiting for me at will call. And I went into a gymnasium type of room. It seemed more like a storage facility at first, because it seemed like the youth room was the room that came after. So this was like a much bigger hall; I wasn't quite sure what its function is for. But in there, they (Guts Church volunteers) gathered us (visitors) into a group and explained that they would show a video to us concerning what was not allowed in the *Nightmare* experience, mentioning what we would have to give up if we happen to have it with us. So they showed the video and things that were included that concerned me were my camera and my recording



device. Other things that were more practical to disallow were things like guns, knives, weapons of any sort. So I gave up my recorder and my camera because I figured it would be better to play it honest. So I gave up those things and made sure that I tried to make sure that I kept a mental note of everything that happened. I put my items, including my cell phone, into a little plastic bag; they gave me a ticket with a corresponding number like with a raffle so I could collect my items at the end.

I came up to a man who said they needed me to sign a waiver. It was wonderful to see waivers since they don't mean anything. But it's nice to know that they're instructing you that you can't sue, or that you're giving up your right to sue even though those don't have any weight. The Church<sup>1</sup> does that too though. So I signed the waiver, handed it to a guy standing around collecting them. Then I went and stood on a podium and they passed a hand-held metal detector over me. I missed the express line that I paid extra for and ended up going into the general admission line; so that was a wasted two dollar but things happen. It gave me more time to make some observations in the longer line.

What were the things that struck me? That was the room that was definitely a Guts Youth room: there were basketball hoops; there were moveable seats or bleachers. There was a stage with a band—there wasn't a band there, but there was a drum set and a couple of other musical instruments. And it was lit up, all of the lights that were functional on it were set up; but again, nobody was there. The line we were all in was just weaving back and forth near that band space. What they had projected over that stage part was a continual video. It was basically a montage of clips from *America's Funniest Videos*. For a really long time, it was accidents with cats—so cats doing stupid stuff and then getting hurt; and then it changed to people doing stupid stuff. It

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<sup>1</sup> Here I'm referring to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is a general practice for activities planned for youth groups for participants to sign similar waivers. For a visual of the waiver used at Guts Church, Hank Willenbrink's dissertation includes a photocopy of the form.

started with accidents caused while bowling; they spent a lot time on people participating in gymnastics. So I thought that was an interesting thing to be showing before the *Nightmare* because hearing everything with the body and pain that it talks about—so the use of *America's Funniest Videos* was intriguing. Plus, with the inclusion of the ABC Channel logo in the bottom of the screen, it made me wonder about the legality of using footage like that for crowd control purposes in that venue. But they had the footage and they showed it. I didn't talk to anyone in the line; I did try listening in on some conversations because there were a lot, *a lot*, of young kids there—tweens, mostly. A lot of teenagers, too. There were a few teenage guys that were behind me. I was right behind a lot of tweens, and then there was a group of girls right in front of the tween group and they were a little older than the tweens. Each group that they let through was made up of about 22 (visitors); I think ours, including me, had about 18, maybe 17. There were about four or five little boys. It looked like of couple of them were on dates. As I was scanning the room, it was predominantly white, however, there were a few minorities present.

So there were lots of big, burly men in white shirts standing guard. And then as we got closer to the front of the line, there was this 5 foot or 5'5" rotund woman with a white shirt who told us we all needed to stay together and hold on to everybody—that we were going to be in a really dark and confined space and we needed to make sure that no one got lost, that we needed to hold hands or hold onto shoulders. So eventually they started yelling, “Go, go, go” and we were let into this small, dark waiting room. And this is the part that was interesting: there were two security guards that accompanied us the whole way. There were demon guides, like what I've been reading about, but they weren't *guiding* us so much. They were accompanying us every so often. Our continual guides were the security guards, which considering how dark and indiscernible things were, that choice didn't surprise me too much. There was definitely a time I

could have tripped over a person that I think was crouching on or crawling along the ground . . . the safety concerns (or rather, the lack thereof) baffle me. Kudos to them for putting themselves out but I started to understand why they wanted to implement waivers.

So they took us into this small, dark waiting room first and there was a recorded voice explaining something about going into the *Nightmare* and the dark regions of our mind. I thought that was an interesting place that they were going to situate Hell; it seemed like depression and things that are within people's heads were related to satanic torture and tormenting. So then a girl, probably a teenage girl, came out from a gap in the floor, acting like one of the witches from *Macbeth*, where she was going in and out between us and getting in our faces. And when she and the recorded voice were done, the security guards started yelling "go, go, go" again, and they pushed us—literal pushing, it was very aggressive—through this cramped hallway into a darkened room where there were strobe lights. And every so often you're supposed to be able to see people. I didn't get the point of that room, other than that it was chaos, and there were things that are surrounding you. If there was another point to that room—a theological point—I did not get it. But maybe that's just the purpose of that room: everything is chaotic; you don't know where you are; you don't know who or what is standing next you. When they're standing next to you and then they're not or there's nothing next to you and then they're right in front of your face—the whole purpose may just to be disorienting and terrifying. The fact that there was a mirror, or possibly two, casting reflections of ourselves and the circling demons certainly contributed to the disorientation. There was something playing on the loud speaker, but I couldn't tell what that was any more than I could make out what was in front of me when there was a flash from the strobe light. It may not have helped that the group of tween I was with were

screaming a lot; though I must say, the screaming was not as inordinately loud as I thought it would be. I thought the screaming would be much worse.

So they pushed us through that space and led us to this room that was basically like a motion ride in that it's a stationary thing that moves itself to give the illusion that the entire object is moving. In this case, it was supposed to be an elevator going down to Hell—it started by shaking a little bit and progressively got more violent. The whole thing was made out of metal and there were cuts in the metal with red light shining through the floor—through circles and then flame etchings on the door. For the most part, I figured the contraption was serving as this simple “going into Hell” transport, but as I was listening to the recorded voice, there was a tall male demon walking around with a rat and showing it to our faces. But there was part of the recording that sounded like it was talking about pills. So it sounded like that room may have been for a representation or commentary on the entrapment of prescription drugs. It didn't sound like it was talking about heroin or cocaine; it was talking about a medicine cabinet. There was something I caught that I thought sounded like “medicine cabinet.” It turns out, according to one of the volunteers in the prayer tent that I talked to at the end, he was not aware of any references to a medicine cabinet and the room was what it seemed: an elevator headed for Hell. There were jolts violent enough to make you think that you're about to lose your balance, but I didn't and that was good.

We got out of the elevator and walked down an inclined ramp and around a corner where we came upon the drunk driving scene. There were a bunch of teenagers in a car and their car had run into a house. There were about two or three dead bodies in the car—lots and lots and lots of blood; it looks like they exploded. They're mostly hanging out of the door windows and the windshield. There was one teenager that crawled towards the audience, looking for help or hope.

Then a mother came out of the house, screaming. And it looked like she was holding a dead baby. My guess is the narrative is that the car, driven by a drunk driver, ran into the front room of the house that also served as a nursery and the baby died as a result. There's also a mangled bike and another dead kid on the ground. So chances are that the child killed on the bike by the car belongs to the same mother who's crying over her baby. To make it worse, the scene is set at Christmas time. There were Christmas lights everywhere decorating the house. Behind the audience there was a nativity scene and a tree with a swing on it. The swing looked age-appropriate for a toddler. It looked like an archetypal middle-class family's house, everyday suburbia situation—so it was the first place where something was a definitive reality. The recorded taunting there over the speaker, speaking about the young man crawling towards us, had something to do with “their lives are shattered because they're dead, but his life is shattered even more because he is looking for help and no one can give it to him; his life will forever be shattered just like his legs are.” The punishment there is the Hell in life, it seemed like: not only does he have to live with the fact that he killed his friends or was implicated in the death of his friends but also the death of an innocent child. The visual effects and props *Nightmare* made use of—especially in terms of make-up and having a car—were quite astounding. Especially when one takes into consideration that people rotate in and out of these scenes over the course of one night three times a week for four weeks. The drunk driving scene was the first room I got a visceral glimpse of Guts Church's commitment to this project.

Then the security guards led us down this corridor or this hallway that was filled with mental patients. My guess is, based on the scene that follows, that they are meant to be dorm guys . . . but they looked like mental patients. One guy specifically had his face made up to look like Heath Ledger's Joker from *The Dark Knight*. But it led into a room that was basically a date

rape scene, so they were probably college guys, or at least demonic college guys. There was one man with his shirt off. That was something that was interesting: these men were all rather plump. They were all overweight. The guy with the Joker face, the guy with his shirt off. They looked strong, like they could lift stuff, but not what one would call “toned.” So that was interesting. So we get into the date rape scene and there’s a bigger man who looks like he’s a little disoriented, probably from alcohol. He’s barely standing up when we entered but he soon sat down because he was holding a hand-held camera that was connected on a closed-circuit to a television set connected to the wall—what he was taping showed up on the television so the audience could see what was happening in front of them physically and what was happening in front of them via the mediated screen. Another guy, who was much scrawnier, was fumbling around. He was kicking off his shoes and walking towards the audience in a clumsy manner to indicate to the audience that he was inebriated. As he approached the audience, he proceeded to take off his belt and unzipped his pants—to the audience, it was an action directed at our group. And then he went back upstage, proceeding to mount this quivering, dazed and confused blonde girl who did not look like she was wearing anything but the bed sheet she was beneath. She looked uncomfortable. And then he got on top of her; I was actually really surprised. We were guided out eventually, but we were there for quite a bit. His leg was positioned to hold his weight between her two legs. He lifted up the bed sheet near her legs and started to move his hand underneath the sheet as though he were feeling up her thigh. That representation got a lot closer than I anticipated that being. And I could not hear what was being said. From what I could gather, the recorded voice was describing a morning after pill. It seemed to be that scenario of a girl taking a date rape drug, she’s going to get pregnant, and then later she’ll have to decide what she will do with the baby, probably deciding on some form of abortion. Other than that, in that

scenario, there did not seem to be any references to abortion; it basically was an instruction for girls not to take strange drinks at parties because you will be raped as a result.

After the date rape scene, we passed through some doors and entered the type of party the girl in the previous room probably met her rapist. It looked like a basement party, complete with loud music, colorful lights, and a plethora of red plastic cups. Our group was first greeted by a nauseated girl who artificially vomited on the ground towards us. Her friends then helped her to a couch on the side. Party dancing resulted in some sexually suggestive moves that erupted in a cat fight—one girl beating up another girl for dancing with her boyfriend. The boyfriend broke up the fight by punching his girlfriend, knocking her out. The whole time, a conspicuous demon circled the scene, floating back and forth between examining us and partying with the kids. I say conspicuous because while the party was populated with many of the young parishioners of color brandishing clothes furnished by either *FUBU* or *Walmart*, this demonic teenager looked like he stepped out a *Hot Topic* catalogue. He wore a sheer, almost fishnet type of black shirt with a dog collar. His hair could be characterized as either emo or gothic. And I'm fairly certain he was eying the men in the group—i.e. the young boys and me. I assumed that he was supposed to be homosexual, but there was little to base that on other than his attire and demeanor. But it did seem to be playing into the notion of overly sensual homosexuals.<sup>2</sup> Unless I missed something that was mentioned over the recorded PA descriptions, this was the only reference to homosexuality in the *Nightmare*. They certainly made up for it in bizarrely fascinating homoeroticism, and I'll get to that later; but there were no scenes of AIDS victims or gay marriage. And that surprised me.

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<sup>2</sup> When I returned the next night, my suspicions or reading of the character in that space proved quite correct. There was a different volunteer actor in many of the roles throughout the *Nightmare*, including this gay demon. The second night, an older man showed up in costume emblematic of Daisy Duke with very revealing cut off shorts and a shirt tied above the exposed belly button. This man's flirtatious and furtive glances at the men in our group were far less understated than the previous evening. Apparently homosexual demons are either gothic leftovers from Madonna's *Erotica* tour or devotees of the Construction Worker from *The Village People*.

After the party scene, we went around the corner into the gang violence scene. This is where all the young black men were. All of the young black men portrayed themselves as incredibly violent, at first simply yelling until they started shooting at each other. Most of them all died, with blood splattered on the wall and the ground. The room was decorated like a mall—a peaceful mall that just goes terribly wrong. And a lot of the bystanders—actually all of them now that I think about it—were teenage girls or tween girls. They were mostly all about the age of the girls I was with. So these bystanders were just all there at the mall shopping and they had to witness or become victims of this terrible gang violence. And I'm pretty sure *Nightmare* used the demographic of the volunteers and guests to its advantage. The culmination of the scene after a number of gunshots have been fired and most of the gang members were dead on the floor, for some reason a surviving thug grabbed a bystanding tween and shot her in the head. He grabbed her from the corner our group was directed to stand in so it provided the illusion that someone out of our group had been taken from us and violently killed. When he shot the innocent little white girl seemingly from among us, not only did the room echo with the sound of a gunshot as it had before, but a concealed machine also plastered the wall behind her with a substance made to look like splattered brain matter. The timing corresponded quite perfectly. She dropped dead and we moved on. Maybe I shouldn't be this critical but it basically seemed like they were saying the real victims of gang violence are little white girls—or maybe that we should seriously consider the seriousness and significance of gang violence in communities because it could result in the death of white girls. This simply ignored the many black male bodies littering the room. The climax of the little white girl's death just seemed indicative of some other American cultural trends.



The next room baffled me at first. It took place in a bedroom with posters for movies like *The Italian Job* and *Coach Carter* on the wall. The date rape scene had a poster on the wall too, but I don't remember what it was; anyway, the date rape scene was more like a dorm room, but this was more like a room in a house—a really nice house. So I think this was supposed to be the room of a teenager. There was a guy pacing back and forth with a lot of anxiety while a flat-screen TV on the wall behind him played a recording of a girl talking. I was confused because I couldn't tell what she was saying—why it was agitating him so much. But she was crying to a camera with her mascara running. When her video ended, he took a gun, went to a corner to sit on a chair at the end of his bed, put the gun in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. The room went red and brain matter splattered against the wall, like in the gang violence scene before. And as soon as that happened, a mirror that was placed right above the head of his bed became transparent. You could see through it a girl's dead body. She had committed suicide in the bathtub, presumably by slitting her wrists. It looked like she had spelt a bunch of names on the wall in blood. It looked like a lot of names for boys, but there could have been some for girls as well. I was wondering if maybe those were the names of boys she had slept with, if she blamed this boy for treating her like a whore or turning her into one. I just didn't know because I could not tell what she was saying on the video recording. I found out afterwards that the video had her explaining that she had had an abortion because her boyfriend (the guy pacing around the room) pressured her to get one. After the procedure, she realized she was going to Hell, so what was the point of going on anyway? She made the video, killed herself, and then upon news of it all and feeling responsible, her boyfriend killed himself. The names written in blood were the possible names she could have given to her unborn baby. I did not get all of that until I talked to Harold King, a volunteer at the prayer tent at the end of the *Nightmare*. What I did pick up on was that

the scene had a lot to do with depression and the devil's manipulation of our dark moments. The recording of the devil's voice did not come until after the boy's suicide. It played as we were escorted out of his room and through the bathroom that held his girlfriend's body. The devil's voice talked about deceiving us, making us think there's no hope anymore after we make terrible decisions.

Then came the scene that simply did not make sense—and apparently it is not supposed to. I was confused by the pictures I saw of it online before I went. I thought going through would help it make more sense and it simply didn't. After the suicide rooms, we stepped onto a bridge and pass through this swamp. And there are these feral boys, and they're moving through the mist and pools of stagnant water outside of the bridge. Then there was this guy walking past us on the shaky bridge. And he looks like a guy from *Deliverance*. He was wearing overalls; I thought he might be a pedophile. Anyway, these half-naked boys were running around with bones in their hands, presumably from the carcass that while obscured by some foliage and fog, was still discernable from the bridge. It was humid; they created an amazing space. It was probably the best as far as a created space: it felt cool and swamp-like. I don't know what they were trying to communicate with that but they had the potential to do it very well. At the end, Harold King told me as far as he was aware there was nothing specific that the scene was commenting on: they did it for kids to participate in and to have a room that was scary just for the fun of it. At least, that was his opinion and sense of things. There was no corollary or message that *Nightmare* was imparting there—unlike every other scene. If that's true and an opinion emblematic of every other volunteer's perspective, then that makes the choice to have that room really interesting.

Next came what I like to call the Carousel of Hell. We stepped into this pitch black room onto a metal platform that was part of a cage. After everyone was on, the platform started rotating and then spotlights started to turn on revealing teenagers trapped in cages suspended in the air above a haunting fog. I started to realize that there were demons on the chains above our heads that were probably going to be coming down while we were in there. Plus, there was a very tall man at the center of the cage. This was the one of the first rooms where I could make out more of what the recorded voice was saying. He mentioned that we were there, in Hell, because we believed all of his lies, that we believed that our bodies were who we really were. And because we believed that, he led us to the place where we would never wake up from his nightmare. When the recording finished its taunting, the platform stopped rotating and most of the spotlights went out; but we could still see the demons descend from above and the tall man step outside of his cage. As demons chased us, the security personnel led us to the next room.

The best way I can think to describe that space would be to compare it to an ultimate cage fighting ring. It was a room dedicated to performing or portraying the abuse Christ received. As we came in, there was a crowd standing around and there was this man, a white man, hunched over, whose back was all cut up and bloody. And I started to realize that everything was set up like a cage fight. There were people, or kids and teenagers, walking around up on a second level. It had that type of curved dome of wiring or fencing that allowed you to look over or through it while preventing the fighters from climbing out of it. Our group passed not quite in the ring but still implicated as in the ring. There was the fighting ring proper, then there was our group, then there was a chain linked fence, and then behind the fence there were a bunch of teenage girls—there were some boys, but they were mostly all girls. They were shaking the fence violently and cheering for what we were seeing. Which was quite the sight, to say the least. At the center of the

ring was Christ as described, but around him were three very, *very* built men—just chiseled, hunky, good-looking men who were not wearing shirts. And they were beating Christ with whips and getting a lot of pleasure out of it. My first thought was Isaiah related: “by his stripes, we are healed.” But my second thought was bewilderment over how overtly homoerotic this scene was. Because it’s not like they got one of the shirtless chubby men from the dorm hallway to beat up Christ. Even Christ was chiseled—it just made me think that this was BDSM where the “S” stands for “Salvation.” The floggers, yelled at our group first. One came to my side and yelled in my ear, “He did this for you!” And then they went over to proceed with the whipping. Loud music, strobe lights, and rattling cages synchronized with the violent thrashing and anguished screaming. That lasted for a few seconds and then the respite consisted of the adolescents shaking the cages and shouting, or chanting, in unison, “Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!”

And then were led into the next room where apparently they did. We went to this room with a giant crucifix that originally was facing away from the audience. Then as we were all in there, it started to rotate clockwise towards us so we could all see Christ. The color palette on the material behind him changed as it happened. Christ was very bloody; his body, which did not have many clothes on it, was literally covered red. It looked like someone opened a giant can of paint and just poured it on him. The texture of the make-up was a much better quality than that sounds, but it’s just the image of copious amounts of blood. Christ struggled with labored breathing for a while and then he gave up the ghost. He spit and signified his death with a collapsed head.

We entered into a dark room and stood around for a few seconds until we saw a man in a corridor. He was a teenager in a suave business suit. This was the first time the recorded voice we heard throughout the *Nightmare* was matched with a body that tried speaking in unison with

the recording. That aspect made it not work so well. He started saying that we would tell ourselves that what we had seen that night was probably just a figment of our imaginations. And then as he was talking, they were using an optical illusion with mirrors so it looked like he was transforming back and forth between the suave young man and a more traditional demonic depiction of the devil with horns and a lot more make-up on, though he was still in a business suit. And after he finished talking, the lights went out. And when they came back on, the body of the more menacing demon, silhouetted by a bright light behind his head, started approaching our group—slowly approaching. He needed to give us time to get into the next room.

The security guards pushed us into the last room, one that looked like a church. It was dark; the walls were black. But there were pews and then a coffin at the front. There were rats on the coffin. And there was this woman who was offering us the rat on a collection plate. She looked like a stereotypical Midwestern American Christian with a white blouse, orthopedic shoes, and glasses with a string on the arms that allow eyewear to hang about the wearer's neck. There was one kid sitting on the pew at what seemed like a funeral service. And then there was a man hunched over a podium. He was shaking his arm violently in a downward motion. He also was silhouetted so that his face was indiscernible. A recorded voice superseded live projection. It sounded like he was supposed to be a minister delivering a sermon or funeral address explaining that the deceased was going to Hell and that there wasn't any hope for him. So the last room wasn't quite the heaven space I was expecting. There was a video of the Guts Church explaining that things were probably overwhelming; that they were not committed to a message of condemnation, but a message of hope and salvation through Christ. The video explained that in the next room there would be people that could answer questions that we had.

I talked to a man in his early 30s named Harold King. I told him why I was in Tulsa and the research that I was conducting. He recognized BYU as a Mormon school. We talked about the BYU football team as well as other sports—I don't know much about sports so the conversation did not last long. He did share with me a condensed life story of how he came to believe in Christ and attend Guts Church. It was a story that contained a history of drug use and depression. We talked about tenants of our respective faiths and finally Harold answered some questions that I had about *Nightmare*. I think my favorite answer came when I asked about the final scene concerning the church because he compared Guts Church and *Nightmare* against those people in Kansas who protest soldiers' funerals. He was referring to the Westboro Church and it surprised me because Ann Pellegrini's article had something similar with one of her conversations with Keenan Roberts. It's interesting that they would both define or contrast the work of a Hell House against something like the Westboro's protests. We also talked a lot about Christian music and a traveling ministering group that started in Guts Church called *The 99*. It might be something worth looking into.

Anyway, for now that is the end of my field notes for Guts Church's *XVIII*.

Appendix B:  
Field Notes for *Hell Night* in Kansas City, Kansas

Date: Friday, 29 October 2010

Location: Kansas City, Kansas

Venue: Praise Chapel Christian Fellowship

So the night started with me showing up around 6 PM to purchase a ticket for the 7 PM show that was sold out. I had to purchase a ticket for the 9 PM show. Apparently, *Hell Night* is not like most Hell Houses. It was far more theatrical than anything else I've seen—much more like a drama ministry or a traditional play with an audience in seats sitting in front of a stage than a walk around Haunted House. So they only had two shows a night that were scheduled to be about two hours long. I found a Laundromat down the street from Praise Chapel to read for a few hours. When I came back, there was a long line that did not start moving until somewhere around 9:20 PM. I think I was in my seat a little after 9:30. *Hell Night* basically took place in Praise Chapel's chapel. It was a long room with a lot of rows of foldable chairs. I ended up getting a decent seat. It was the third row from the front; I was just at the very end on the outside, close to stage left. I was a few seats in until a mother and daughter asked to change seats with me. The pastor had just made an announcement explaining that people would not be able to get up during the production unless it was an emergency because some of the actors and demons would be using the aisles at the end of the rows and the main aisle down the middle of the room to walk around. The young girl did not want to be close enough for the demons to touch her. I proved an acceptable barrier.

My seat so far stage left did create a few visual difficulties. Basically, Hell blocked my view. The stage was divided into thirds. Stage right housed Heaven. There were clouds that

looked like they were made out of cotton. They made have had glitter in them. There was also a gold gate and a big golden book on a pedestal. In the middle of the stage, there were some stairs that went up to a big chair. It turned out that was the Throne of God. Stage left was where they kept Hell. It was a rough rock structure that had some kind of alcove or door on the bottom that demons passed in and out of. It was the main entrance and exit venue for the actor in the giant Satan costume, and incidentally, the main exit for those dragged to Hell. Above that alcove, there was a balcony or perch that some demons peered out of. It was definitely notable when it was used as the starting point for a demon on a zip line. Anyway, Hell tended to block my view. I really don't know what the bottom level of Hell looked like and occasionally I couldn't see what was happening before the Throne of God because Hell's massive structure got in the way.

As the audience filled the room and took their seats, the main pastor talked up what we would be seeing that night and some other exciting things the Praise Chapel was up to. He described the plans to open another Praise Chapel building in Kansas City, Missouri so there would be a sister church. He talked about youth group activities and mentioned that *Hell Night* was a fund raiser that was going to help support some of the programs they were interested in having. The pastor also gave some rules for the evening, like not using the aisles unless it was an emergency. Even then, you were only supposed to use the outside aisles. The other rule I thought was interesting was that you weren't allowed to touch the actors. The pastor explained that at times the actors and the demons might get really close to audience members, but audience members should never touch them. He talked for quite some time and then eventually the show began—probably around 9:50 PM.

The entire room went dark and then a video was projected onto a screen that was in front of the Throne of God. The little film gave a little preamble to the idea that the Bible discusses



Hell as a lake of fire where sinners go but we really don't know what it's like. Then the film conjectured: "what it would be like if we got a letter from someone that was there?" The screen then became that letter. As words moved across the screen, a male teenage voice narrated what was written. The letter was from Josh to his friend Zack. Apparently, Zack was Christian and never told Josh about Jesus. Josh said he knew Zack was Christian, but he never asked about it because he figured if Zack wanted to talk about it, he would have. As the film went on, Josh's voice grew more agitated, accusatory, and scared. He mentioned that he died in a car accident. He explained that while he thought that after you die people just went away and didn't feel anything, where he was at he could actually feel everything—really well in fact. He felt everything that happened to him. Banging noises started to play and the underscoring music intensified to give the impression that Josh was in some kind of prison cell and some demons were coming to get him before He finish his letter. Josh, in quite the bitter voice said, "What I don't understand, Zack, is if you believed in Jesus, why didn't you tell me about Him? Why did you let this happen to me?" The sound of fire crackling intensified and Josh screamed in agony. And then the film ended with Josh writing, "P.S. Wish you were here." I almost chuckled when most of the audience audibly responded with collective "ohs" and "ooos."

The screen went black for a little bit and then it showed clips from horror films like *Hellraiser* and *Thirteen Ghosts*. And then after showing the scary clips with sounds of screaming on top of them, the screen read a verse of scripture out of the Bible, specifically 2 Timothy 3:1–5. It read, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than

lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.”  
The voice reading that scripture belonged to an adult male.

The screen went dark and some lights on the stage came on starting what I considered the third and final preamble. The stage was depicted as some kind of rough street in a bad part of town. There were gang members, homeless drunkards, drug dealers and prostitutes. There was also this nice young black man who looked like he was trying to witness to each of these individuals. Gang members pushed him out of the way; prostitutes mocked him and either tried to seduce him or flouted his message by hanging onto their pimp. There was an elderly woman, possibly homeless that started to pay attention to him. This was all pantomimed. No one was speaking audibly. There was loud rap music playing over everything. Eventually, gang violence broke out. The young Christian man tried to mediate and get others to safety, but he got shot in the process. He fell down dying. The lights went out and another loud gunshot reverberated over the sound system.

At that point *Hell Night* started what I like to call the “Trial of Heaven Scenes.” There were eleven such scenarios that pretty much all followed the same pattern: Each character went through a highly codified set of events: (1) the character entered unaware that he or she had died; (2) the devil interrupted the character’s interaction with the audience by throwing him or her into a ring of judgment before God’s Throne; (3) the voice of God quoted scripture and then showed the character and the audience a video clip from the character’s life; (4) the character’s name was not found in the Book of Life so God condemned him or her to Hell; (5) the devil dragged the character into Hell; and (6) blood-curdling screams ensued. After the sound of the gunshot, the angels and the devils came out to their respective positions.

The main devil, Satan, was very large—or least his costume was. It had large horns that looked like they were wrapped in leather. Other demons were quite intricate as well. They were full body and face costumes. These were not the demons of creepy, zombie face make-up. These were full on masks. I was actually impressed by these demons more than those at *Nightmare* though there were definitely less of them. The angels were interesting. There were two men and two women. All of them had white wings and gold or silver faces. The men were dressed like warriors, adorned with breastplate armor, helmets, and shields. They were also carrying swords. They stood in front of the steps that went up to the Throne of God. The female angels stood on the Heavenly canopy at stage right. One was just there with a harp and the other was in charge of the big golden Book of Life. God was primarily represented by a big booming pre-recorded voice. There was also a light that emanated from behind the throne. The light rotated as God's voice talked.

In every single scenario, God would address the individual by name and ask him or her, "What did you do with my Son?" The individual would make some kind of response that showed that they did not believe in Christ or that Christ failed them. God would show a video of that person's life. So the representations of sins were all (mostly) depicted through media or video. After the video ended, God would say, "It is written . . ." and He would continue with a scripture relevant to what was just shown and how their behavior was contrary to the Bible. God would then ask his angel if that individual's name was written in the Book of Life. Usually, while leafing through the book and delivering her statement in an emotionless detachment, the angel responded, "It is not written, Lord." God would then banish that individual to Hell with a "Depart from me." Satan and the others took the individual from the circle of judgment into the Hell area stage left.

After the gunshot sounded in the dark, whoever was managing the sound effects played the sounds associated with a car crash—squealing wheels, breaking glass, and crunching metal. And thus arrived our first sinner. He, like everyone else who followed, came from the back of the room and up the center aisle. This was a very macho white man of average height and build. His comments towards some of the women in the audience seemed a bit misogynistic. He would turn to men in the audience and ask them how they could allow their wife or daughter to dress the way that they were dressing. According to the video, he was also domestically abusive. He had quite the temper over very little things. His home video consisted of him getting angry at the dinner table. The video suggested that he started beating his wife while his children went to hide. He then got in a car and because of road rage got in a car accident and died. I'm not sure if it was the subject matter or that it was the first character of the evening, but when God banished the man to jail, the audience cheered. They did that a few other times throughout the evening, but it certainly did not happen every time. It was an interesting reaction.

The second character was Righteous Rita. This short, stout, and middle-aged black woman seemed to come from out of the audience. At the very least, she came from the outside aisle on the opposite side of the church from where I was sitting. She was the only one who did not come down the center aisle. Her dress was a fantastic red sequenced dress that looked like it could still be appropriate for Sunday church service attire. Righteous Rita was extolling her happiness that she was going to be able to get into Heaven. She knew she had done everything she was supposed to. When the devil sat her down, she was a bit shocked. Her life video was told through an *Oprah* parody called *Onita*. A middle-aged black woman talked about her excitement to surprise Righteous Rita with a gift for all of the great charitable works Rita had provided. Apparently, Rita nominated herself for the prize based on the charity work accomplished by an

individual. Onita surprised Rita at her home with a getaway cruise to the Caribbean. The second segment showed a grief stricken Onita reporting on the death of Righteous Rita. Apparently she died on her trip—by being eaten by a shark. I will say this for *Hell Night*, they certainly had a good time with what they were doing and they cracked a lot more jokes than I ever anticipated a Hell House doing. So yes, Righteous Rita thought her good works would get her into Heaven; she never relied on the redemptive grace of Christ. She didn't realize that she was gratifying her own pride, showing her righteousness for the praise of mankind rather than for the glory of God. Satan took her away.

The third character was a younger black woman who seemed highly invested in militant black power. She wore large sunglasses and referred to all of the white people in the audience as crackers. There was a violet element to her. Her life video showed a lot of run-ins with the law and her last moments in life were based in her trying to steal from a convenience store. She pulled out a gun to get away and ended up getting shot herself. God didn't seem to care for the level of anger in her. The scripture quoted for her came from the Sermon on the Mount where Christ talked about how being angry or having wrath in your heart was akin to murder. I thought this was a very interesting depiction of a very socially specific racial concern.

The fourth character got into more familiar Hell House territory and definitely contained the best element *Hell Night* had to offer: the demon zip line. The fourth character was Jena Angel. And how she was anything but an angel. Her life depicted her homelife with a physically abusive father that drove her from a kind and sweet innocence to rampant drug usage. The depiction of her tripping out for the first time with all of the blurry camera images was disorienting but memorable. Apparently the drugs were her tool for escaping the horrors of her own life. Eventually she took drugs that drove her to suicide. She stumbled around towards the

bathroom and started freaking out. It seemed like she was paranoid of everything surrounding her. Eventually she got in the bathtub and started rocking back and forth. Then we saw that she had slit her wrists and died there. Jena Angel responded to God's question about what she did with his son by exclaiming, "What did He do for me?!" When the devil grabbed her arm to escort her into Hell, she brushed him off and walked defiantly in on her own accord. A bold choice, I must say. Gave an interesting light to her character. It was not soon after that though that her own screams came forth very quickly and loudly. Covered in blood, she ran back out of Hell, trying to escape. That's when the demon on the Hell balcony flew across the room on the zip line to catch her. The audience loved it. A demon literally flew over us—best spectacle every. Unphased by her kicking and screaming, the demons dragged Jena Angel back to Hell. And we went on.

The fifth character was Gay Gary—the most stereotypical representation of a flamboyantly homosexual man I think I have ever seen. He was a middle aged white man wearing cut-off jean shorts, a pair of giant sunglasses, and a sparkly cravat. I believe a song by *The Village People* was playing when he burst into the room. When the devil approached Gay Gary to drag him to the circle of judgment, Gay Gary sized up Satan and exclaimed, "Mmm. Tall, dark, and horny. Just like I like 'em." He was of course stroking the devil's horns when he said horny. The crowd found it quite funny. I'm not much for gay stereotype humor, but I'll confess that one got me. This Hell House just kept surprising me with how much humor they played into things. Gay Gary's life video was quite surprising. His life was shown through the lens of a bizarre reality television program that Gary seemed to participate in while he was alive. It was called *The Queer World*—an odd combination of *The Real World*, *Survivor*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Most of the video seemed to be all about the intro to the show. People

were cracking up while they were showing big burly men wearing frilly aprons, shopping for clothes, or reading grocery checkout stand magazines. The intro was longer than any other segment of the video. I think the humor must have been in knowing the men that were in the video—I like to think the feminization of a big burly man can only take you so far with an audience. I'm not entirely sure why, but apparently Gay Gary's housemates voted him out of the house. The audio was not great so if they explained why they all unanimously disliked him, I missed it. The video continued by showing Gay Gary getting a bit sloshed. He then went to a mall and ran into an old friend. The friend tried explaining to Gary how he had found Christ and realized that the whole idea about being born gay was a lie. He invited Gary to go to church with him. Gary (still quite inebriated) pushed his old friend away, exclaiming that he was proud of whom he was and that he shouldn't have to change that to please anybody, not even God. I'm not sure how he died. But after the video, Gary certainly was repentant explaining that he was deceived. He knew he wasn't born gay and he should be given another chance. The pleas fell on deaf ears because God tried reaching out to him with his friend; so he had his chance to change.

The sixth sinner was forgettable. It was basically a comment on gang violence. A black male in his early thirties was an influential gang leader who died in a drive by. Overall, he was just less fun. No one like him when he came out. It wasn't that people hated him; they were just disinterested in him. He was not as charismatic as his predecessors or those that came after him. He killed people in his life video, had little in the way of positive attributes, and was not portrayed by a compelling actor.

And then there was Nasty Tina. Oh so much to say about Nasty Tina who started by coming in saying goodbye to her parents. She was explaining that they could trust her while they were away because she was responsible. Then she laughed and did a bit of a striptease. She took

off her school uniform to reveal a tight and short party dress. The devil interrupted her provocative dancing. Tina was a promiscuous girl, partying with a lot of different guys at a bunch of different parties. Then she got a no good boyfriend who flipped out when he found out she was pregnant with his baby. She was surprised when he said that she should just get rid of it. And then more surprised when he said he didn't care about Tina. She cried and went to her mother for advice. Her mother was livid and said that they couldn't let Tina's father find out. Tina's mother said they needed to cover up Tina's mistakes. She said Tina should take an abortion pill. Tina was later shown going into her bathroom and removing pills from a box labeled "Abortion Pill." After she took one, she got sick and started throwing up blood into the toilet. Eventually she collapsed and the camera panned across her body to reveal copious amounts of blood, which presumably issued from her vagina, staining her pants. It appeared that the pill killed Tina's baby and Tina herself. After God quoted a scripture to Tina, Tina asked what happened to her baby. An angel brought out a little baby in a golden diaper to show Tina that the baby died and went to Heaven. Tina asked to hold her baby but the angel took the baby away and Tina was dragged away to Hell.

The eighth character was the nice black man at the beginning of the show that died during his attempt to witness to prostitutes and homeless people in the middle of a gang fight. His life was not perfect in the beginning. It showed his association with gangs and the violence that he committed against others. Then it showed how he found out about the Bible, read it, prayed, and accepted Christ. There was then a heartwarming montage of all the good things that he did. His name was found in the Book of Life . . . and it was. There was triumphant music and the angels crowned him with glory (or a dollar store crown). Before he continued with the angels to his home in Heaven, he asked about the last people he was preaching to before he died. God said



that before either of them died, one of the elderly homeless women he witnessed to did accept Christ. She appeared, they embraced, and then they both walked up to God's Throne as everyone cheered. Some members of the audience gave a standing ovation. I thought that that was where it was going to end. But there were still three more characters.

The ninth character was a man named Reverend Bishop—a highly charismatic preacher. He was like a televangelist on steroids. Reverend Bishop was a black man in his thirties. His dress and presentational style was very flashy and bombastic. When the devil grabbed him, he tried rebuking the devil in the name of God. In one of the very rare instances, we heard a recording for Satan's voice. He quoted a scripture from the Book of Acts where a demon apparently said that he recognized Peter's authority and even Paul's but he did not recognize a certain individual who tried casting him out. Apparently Reverend Bishop did not possess God's authority over the devil. It turns out that might be because he used his position in the church to steal (or buy) drugs from people that he would use for his own recreation. He also met with women in his church offices to help them spiritually and emotionally by manipulating them into having sex with him. God did not care for this and so he was banished to Hell.

The tenth character was Floozy Suzy—a prostitute that the good Christian was trying to witness to before they both died. I realize that I don't know what cheap prostitutes in Kansas City wear, but Floozy Suzy looked like a prostitute out of the film *Pretty Woman* with high boots, fishnet stockings, and possibly crimped hair. Unlike the elderly homeless woman, it did not appear that Suzy accepted Christ into her heart before she died. Suzy's video revealed that she was molested as a child and that led to her life as a prostitute. Living as a prostitute was how she got away from home so she wouldn't be molested by her dad. I'm not sure how you could believe a person in such circumstances is worthy of damnation but it turns out that because she

did not accept Christ when he was offered to her, she was. It was during Suzy's trial that the stage opened up to reveal a bleeding Christ on a crucifix. The Throne of God flew one way and the wall behind the Throne flew another and there was Christ. He delivered his prayer for the Father to forgive people for they know not what they do. And then he said, "It is finished." Floozy Suzy still berated Christ, saying he never did anything to help her. He never stopped the men who did things to her. And I must say that as the demons dragged her away, I thought it was odd that I found myself agreeing with Suzy. In the dramaturgy of this Hell House, it really did not seem that God or Christ did do anything to help her or to stop the trauma in her life. So I imagine that the way her claim is reconciled with the depiction represented lies in conversations held in sermons that were not part of the *Hell Night* presentation. Suzy's concerns, or concerns about how Christians at Praise Chapel can think about women in Suzy's position, is answered elsewhere. And *Hell Night* almost assumes a working knowledge of that epistemology.

The final character judged was Satan. The male angels finally moved and took Satan and threw him down into the judgment light. Reading biblical scriptures regarding the binding of Satan, God banished the devil and the crowd went wild. The angels bound Satan in metal chains and took him into Hell where there were unworldly screams of pain and anguish coming from the devil. The crowd clapped throughout this scenario. There was then a montage of all the people who had died that night, like a video of remembrance. It was a recap of all the people we had seen that night, like Gay Gary and Floozy Suzy when they were happier. I guess it was to remind everybody what happened, give a little recap. It also was a way of letting the actors take a bow without bringing them out. We were mourning their characters while remembering what the actors did for the performance.

The final part of the performance was when the pastor came out and talked for another 30 minutes. He recapped many of the things that we saw. He spent time giving little sermons based on a few of the scenes. For example, with Nasty Tina, he said that there are many people who claim they are good Christians that convince their daughters to get an abortion. Those people, according to the pastor, are not real Christians. The whole time he was talking, there was music underscoring what he was saying. It was a type of cheesy, new age spiritualist type of music. I was surprised at how it kept going without a break. I figured it was used during other church meetings. There was one time during the post-show talk back sermon that the stage opened up again and Christ was still up there on the cross. But this time he didn't speak. It was just a focal point for us all to consider if we had accepted Christ yet. Eventually the sermon became an altar call. At that point, it was far past midnight, my ride was waiting, and I had to leave. Despite requests that I return to my seat and not disrupt the last part of the presentation, I walked out the door. So technically I did not see *Hell Night* to the end, but I got the research I came for. Yeah, lots of interesting uses of media in this one. And we certainly did not move around like in other Hell Houses. Oh, how we did not move.

Appendix C:  
Field Notes for *Final Destination V* in Chandler, Arizona

Date: Saturday, 30 October 2010

Location: Chandler, Arizona

Venue: The Door Christian Center

Around 7 PM, I walked up to the church and purchased a ticket; but they did not start at 7 PM. I'm not sure why but it seemed like it took them much longer to get started than their advertised starting time. Of all the Hell Houses I've been going to recently, this was the most lack-luster group. The people there, the volunteers running it, seemed to be enthusiastic; but the audience, the people in line were less than responsive to the attempts volunteers made to make the experience of waiting in stagnant line less boring. It was also the least attended of the Hell Houses I visited, which may have contributed to the low energy levels in the audience. It was odd, because the line wasn't moving much, or at all. But that certainly happened in Tulsa and Kansas City without similar lethargic reactions. So I waited in line for quite some time, and part of that was due to much smaller sizes for groups that were let in and when they did let groups in it happened far less frequently. On the plus side, the volunteers did try entertaining us by providing a DJ to play music and an emcee to occasionally ask trivia questions. I won a bag of popcorn for correctly answering a question about *The Addams Family* film. In hindsight, I should not have scarfed down that bag of popcorn as fast as I did; it didn't help that I didn't have anyone to share it with either. I was also interviewed by people from the church with a video camera because I volunteered to participate in an interview. I don't recall exactly what they asked me, but some inquires included questions about what I was expecting to see, whether or not I thought

it would live up to my expectations or hype. So of course I answered like I would and do: I told them I expected to see a number of vignettes, that they would probably depict how America is sinning today, and that the devil is fighting for our souls but Christ is fighting for us as well. Regarding whether or not it would live up to expectations, I said either way *Final Destination* would probably live up to what it wanted to be. Which, by the way, I was surprised because at the end of the experience I don't know that it depicted Christ fighting for our souls. In fact, I'm pretty sure it didn't.

Anyway, I went in and there was a group of six of us at first, but then a little girl opted to leave once we were inside; so our group went down to five. It was me, two women in their 40s or maybe their 50s, and then two people in costume—the only two people I saw in costume all night actually. They were a couple: the girl was dressed as Frida and the guy as a stereotypical country music singer. So when we came in and their approach was definitely a conversion of space by using a lot of black trash bag lining, or at least that type of material. It was a black tarp all over this church, covering everything; corridors were created with it. Entire rooms were covered in it except for floors and ceilings. Their conversion of space was based on this plastic wrapping.

So we entered in and there was this strobe light. And there was this voice that said that if we wanted to leave we had five seconds left. Which was really sad because the girl paid \$10; but then I noticed I was becoming a little incredulous when I started suspecting if she was a plant. I don't think she is now; but I just find it funny that after all of these events I've gone to now that I'm convinced that people that look like they're part of your group are actually put there by people who are running the Hell Houses. Anyway, yeah, there was an automated voice—I'm really getting interested in how media plays a part in each of these Hell Houses; what part of it is

live and what part of it is pre-recorded. So there was a pre-recorded voice of Satan and we went down this long corridor and we were led into this one room where there was a screen in an alcove. They had us standing back against a wall. And the whole time I'm in each of these rooms, I kept expecting a demon to jump from behind a curtain and take us by surprise, but it never happened. Our backs were up against this wall watching this screen that's playing a continual loop of Jigsaw from the *Saw* films, or at least the puppet figure. We just saw his face and it may have been a mash-up of a number of different clips. His mouth was moving, though it wasn't fitting particularly well with the recording as far as synchronism is concerned. It did, however, produce an effectively eerie feeling.

The voice was in that of the devil in a very declarative first person. He kept saying "I know." Saying things like, "I know all your thoughts," "I know what you had for breakfast this morning," "I know everything about you because you tell me." And what he said is that the way that we tell him is through Facebook and through social networking—which I thought was a really interesting place for this Hell House to start. He said that we're his friends on Facebook; and we add him as our friend on Facebook; and we don't do anything to get rid of him as a friend on Facebook. And we update our status based on the things that he tells us or that he'll know more about us based on the stuff that we'll tell him through status updates. Works both ways I suppose. He gloated about how easy that process was. I was not anticipating that at all. So yeah the evils of social networking, and the Internet, and how we give power to the devil because of how we use the Internet. And on a basic level I was just interested in the use of the *Saw* videos. I don't know if that's legal. Because when I went to the one in Kansas City, they used clips from *Thirteen Ghosts* and I'm sure that's not legal. The use of Jigsaw is just interesting in and of itself because if I understand the premise of the films correctly, he captures people and puts them

through torture porn plotlines to teach them a moral lesson. The justification is that this crazy guy believes people in society have become debased and that they need to go through something to learn how behave correctly or they don't deserve to live—which plays into why an American audience would be okay with the morality of the torture. They're bad people anyway so it's an awful situation but they kind of deserve it. They have to prove themselves worthy of living. And the conflation of that idea with Hell Houses is just incredible to me.

After that, we went through this corridor that kept getting shorter and shorter which became a little uncomfortable for me. But luckily that did not last too long. We ended up in this dark room with a wooden altar at the center. I'm not entirely sure what it was supposed to mean but my guess was that it was talking about the occult but more this notion that it was building this narrative—that there had to be a reason that we had the chance to see what Hell was going to be like, to go in this final destination. So what ends up happening is that the devil addressed us and then the devil's minions—both demons and black robe wearing priests—sacrificed this girl on the altar, they slit her throat. With her death, the devil said the circle was broken and they needed someone to fill the space now vacant in the circle. So all the demons started walking around the altar in a circle and they started speaking but in their own live voices. I think it was the first time that a live voice was heard in this Hell House—other than the sacrificed girl's screams of “No!” Anyway, they mentioned that for this one night we would be able to see where the dead go, that we'd be able to see our final destination. And so they had this type of pre-narrative even though it was already halfway into our journey. I wasn't sure if it was right before or right after this altar room, but there was just this short little room where there was a dead woman in a giant metal bathtub and another woman who looked like she was hooked up to a

rudimentary electric chair. Maybe the demons were torturing those people there. Whatever it was, it didn't make sense other than that it was scary looking. It was just on the way to the stairs.

Because then we went up the stairs. And this was an interesting use of space, in my opinion. There were these very demon oriented entrance or initiation sort of things, we went upstairs, and when we came back down the stairs we entered a Hell space again. But all of the stuff that was "things that happen in life and reality" that was on the second floor in between. So this use of levels—I'm not sure if it was intentional or if it just came out of the space itself—lent itself to a reading of how real everyday life was on the second floor and the subterranean realities of Hell were happening underneath us. It probably was intentional at the end, as far as our literal descent down into Hell, but as far as how the levels were in relation to the first stuff—I'm not sure how intentional that was.

So anyway, we went up these stairs and it was a party scene and there were these teenagers that were dancing around. And what was really interesting was that I thought it was going to be a scene warning kids about the dangers of parties—which it probably was because there was a lot of drinking going on there—but they had these two kids who were breakdancing or hip-hop dancing (I'm not sure what to call it since I'm not that hip). But it was interesting because I wasn't sure if they were condemning that type of dancing because they were actually using their bodies in a very talented way. These kids were pretty good dancers, at least decent enough that I thought they were doing well. And so the use of the body in that moment I just thought was really interesting.

This became the first moment where it was less mediated. The music died down and there was this scene where a girl and a guy were just talking. It was scripted but it was performed live; it wasn't recorded. The girl described how she just got out of a relationship with a guy she did



some things with but she didn't care for him too much. But it seemed like he was just way interested in her. She asks the new guy she was talking to for a drink. Then this other kid, the one she was talking about, came in, wearing a hoodie. He got very angry; he felt betrayed. He took a gun out and shot the new guy she had been talking to. And then the kid in the hoodie addressed the audience. He talked directly to us about how he came from a really bad home, that he was hurt a lot as a child. He thought she was different, that she really cared about him but it seemed that she was just lying to him. And then he took his gun, yelling, "I'll teach her!" And then he shot her too. The gun was probably shooting blanks—it was enough to create some sparks from firing and some smoke as well when they fired. He shot the boy two or three times and the girl once or twice.

And then we followed him into the next room which was a living room. A TV set was on and there was a report being delivered on a news show. It was saying there was a kid that killed some other kids at a party. They had his name, he had been identified. The report was warning watchers about him and said police were looking for him. It was a very detailed news report: it mentioned he had been dating the girl, and the new person seemed to be taking his place. It was just very funny news report-esque sort of thing with how intimately aware it seemed to be. So he was feeling really bad and depressed about it. And then the news report voice changed into the devil's voice as the lights went red. The voice told him that he wasn't worth anything, that he should just look at what he had done. He had taken people's lives and there wasn't a point to live anymore. Basically the devil talks the kid into committing suicide. And it was kinda funny because about three seconds after we stepped into the room, I knew where it was going just by how the room was set up. There was a couch and right behind the couch there was a wall, but then two or three feet behind that there was another wall. So I realized that he was going to be

talked into committing suicide, he's going to shoot himself, and then they're going to have a little blood cannon that shoots something onto that far back wall. And that's exactly what happened. So sat on the couch, put the gun in his mouth, and shot himself; blood splattered onto the wall behind him.

Then we continued on to the abortion room where there was this pregnant girl who talked about how she wasn't going to be able to keep her baby. And the room was this clinic that had all of these really weird signs that said stuff like "Abortion makes a baby get to Jesus quicker" and "Have a baby now? No way! I want to live MY Life." So they had these signs like there could be signs in a clinic like posters on the wall. And they're all talking about how abortion is terrible in a way that makes it sounds like abortion is great and something to cheerfully celebrate. It was interesting how it mocked the space.

So a nurse came in and said that it was time for her appointment. The girl went one way, but our group followed a nurse down a different hallway where there ended up being these little yellow footprints on the wall. They were infant sized footprints. And then that turned into writing that said, "Mommy, what did you do to me? Where did I go?" and "Mommy, please help me." And then we got into the abortion room. This was the one time in my Hell House experience where I actually saw the full-out depiction of the abortion scene. And it was as disgusting as I had read about in John and Ann's work.

So there was this woman that was in profile that was the doctor administering the abortion. And the girl was a table in a hospital gown with a sheet over her. There were all of these sucking sounds. Next to the operating table, there was this shelf of scary instruments that may have been medical tools eighty years ago. The doctor's degree on the wall was glowing in the black light. The doctor called for more suction and then the girl starts to wake up, coming out

from the effects of the anesthesia I suppose. As the girl is waking up she starts to say, “I thought I was going to be asleep during this. You said I wasn’t going to be able to feel any of this.” And as she starts saying that she doesn’t want to go through with the procedure, the doctor and the nurse start yelling at her, “You already made your choice! You made your choice!” So the doctor was fairly berating. She had her hands up into where the woman’s vagina would be and she started pulling out hamburger meat, at least that’s my guess as to what kind of meat it was. It’s probably whatever meat is suggested by New Destiny Church’s Hell House kit. She threw the meat at us, or in front of us. It happened three or four times, just tossing meat at our feet. And then she took out this bloody baby doll—a very small one—and that’s when the doctor turned out of profile and faced us. She had blood on the right half of her face. So she handed the baby to the nurse before leaving the room. The nurse took the remains and tossed it into a dumpster on her way out.

Before we left, they started showing video clips in the same room on this video screen. It was edited, cutting back and forth between scenes from Mel Gibson’s *The Passion* where Christ is getting beaten and all of this footage of aborted fetuses. Just a bunch of different pictures of babies next to coins to show comparative sizes. And all of the embryos or fetuses were covered in or suspended in this viscous goo and a placard would read what age of development they were at. Something like “24 weeks” after fertilization.” There were some I was just having my doubts about—like “I don’t think the embryo looks that much like a fetus after 7 weeks” so I was bit skeptical of their portrayal of “facts.” More importantly, the whole decision to show the beating of Christ, and the crucifixion—just this whole notion of the pain of Christ—spliced up with abortion and the bodies that had been rejected and expelled at a young age. They were living things. That was a really big thing, these fetuses were more than just tissue. That was one of the

things the doctor and nurse yelled at the girl: “You thought it was just tissue! Looks like it was more than that!”

And the oddest thing was that that was the only time I saw Christ at this Hell House. Christ wasn't at the end. He was only in the abortion scene. And it was only a video of Him. And after we saw that, one of the guides or an automated voice said “Now it's time to go to your final destination.” So we left the room and went down some stairs, entering the Hell area. There were all of these demons. It was very loud. And by this point, I was already sick from the abortion room. I wanted to throw up but I didn't want to give them a point on their website. I was dehydrated. And after so many days of breathing in fake fog, I just couldn't take it anymore. I was fairly nauseous and then they took us into this loud, dark, stuffy room where there was all of this screaming.

They moved our group to the center of the room. To our left there was this girl in chains who looked like she was covered in blood. A spotlight turned on her so we knew to look at her. She was screaming about not understanding why she was there. She didn't drink that often; she only drank that one time. My guess is that she was in Hell for drunk driving. I don't even know if she was driving. All I know is she was drunk and died in a car accident. There's just so many reasons to go to Hell. She was screaming—and just a reminder—every voice in Hell was recorded. So the voices that were in the “real life” were not recorded, except for the TV and the devil, but when we were back down in Hell, everything was recorded. I'm just really interested in their use of media: when things are live and when things are recorded.

Next, to our right, there was this guy cut in half on a torture table. His body was just incredibly fake. He was yelling, “Oh, I thought I was born that way.” From what I could gather, that was there nod to homosexuality and how people are not born gay, that it was just a lie. It was

somewhat hard to tell because the recording was not particularly loud and the actor was *terrible* at lip-syncing to the recording. But to be fair, he probably couldn't hear the recording very well either. Then there was another girl who had an abortion. There was this red string that was pulled out from under her dress and demons were playing with it. She was saying, "I thought I was ready. I thought I loved him but I really didn't."

Then there was a woman who wore a dress that looked like it had been ripped a bit. She was screaming about how her husband abused her and how he didn't care about her. And when he went away, she met a guy and had an affair. So she was there because she had committed adultery. And then the lights went low, so all of the demons could get really close to all of us. And then the lights came up to reveal a giant thrown with a HUGE devil demon with a HUGE costume. He started talking to us. I don't remember what he was saying. I was checked out by that point.

And then the doors opened up and we were led into the next room. And I was ready for Christ on the cross, but no. That was the end. They took us into a room with four or five men; I thought it was interesting that there were no women. Just some really nice polished men. A white man talked to us about how these things are really going on every day. He said that they may not be happening in our lives, but they're happening in America. It was a LOT about what was going on in America and how that was affecting our nation. He just kept using the phrases "this nation" and "this country" over and over again. One of my favorite moments was when he said, "we see stuff like this happening every day. It may not happen to us but it happens. There was this man who was working and there was this accident and his head got cut off. Amen." It was like he was using Amen as this filler for "um." So instead of saying "um" he said "Amen." I noticed this when I went to church in Tucson. It just seemed like there was a better word that could have

been used after saying someone had their head cut off. I know; it's probably just that it's not the use of the word "Amen" that I am accustomed to hearing. It was just a little jarring.

So they requested that we bow our heads and then they said that if you felt that you needed to recommit to Jesus, you needed to raise your hand. The girl dressed like Frida did; no one else did. But they took her and the guy she was with into another room. The rest of us were escorted out. I will say that at many times I would say that there are many times when I feel that I should recommit myself to Christ. And that moment was probably one of them; but at that point I did not want to pray with the people at the Door Christian Center. I was ready to leave.

When I was riding back on bus to my hotel, I thought about how it's such a scripted approach. The whole idea about telling people that they saw terrible things but that it's nothing compared to what it's really like, they try to capture it but they'll never be able to fully explain how terrible things are. The guy in the last room mentioned a lot about what the Bible says about Hell (in fact everything he said pretty much started with "The Bible mentions" or "The Bible says"). The Bible says that there is a lake of fire that never stops burning but always consumes. And so it's just scripted, this notion, that by asking us to bow our heads and raise our hands up if we have felt that need to recommit. There's this type of participation prerequisite to move on to the next room to be prayed over. And for those who did not feel so to leave. Which was just so different than *Nightmare*. Because *Nightmare* they just prayed with everybody. But with *Final Destination* you needed to be able to recognize and respond to something that was stirring, something that was there. But it's interesting because it necessitates a working or pre-knowledge of it. You have to be familiar with the altar call dynamic and procedure of it all for it to be something you might eventually respond to. But if it's your first time going, it probably wouldn't make any sense to you because you have no idea what they're going to do when they take you

into the next room. Part of me wonders if above everything else, if that moment and maybe Hell Houses themselves, are just preaching to the choir, just focusing on getting people to recommit. Because if you're not recommitting, if you're wholly new, there is no discernable access points for the uninitiated. And so it was an interesting experience.

Of the three I went to, and this may have been because I was dehydrated and tired, but *Final Destination* was the only one that disturbed me. It made me nauseous. And it disturbed me as far as its politics, not disturbed as in I got scared. I was simply disgusted with it and I found myself glad that there not many people that came to that one. Which was odd after really becoming ecumenical and understanding of this particular performative and religious practice. There just was no Christ; they had no depiction of Christ. There was no moment of Christ will conquer. It was all about what evil the devil is accomplishing in our lives and country. There was no binary, there was only the depiction of Hell. And that was my experience with *Final Destination*.

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