

The Dislocation of Charisma

A Case Study of New Creation Church, Singapore

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This ethnographic research project explores the relationship between charisma, institutional structure, and physical space in New Creation non-denominational megachurch. New Creation was founded in Singapore in 1984, and currently boasts a registered congregation of 31,000.¹ It has since expanded from its original site into six different service venues around the country. All of these venues are public, commercial spaces such as concert halls, theatres, or ballrooms. The physical service is conducted by Senior Pastor Joseph Prince only at Star Vista Theatre (owned by New Creation), whilst being live-streamed to the other five venues for virtual services. Since his appointment in 1990, Pastor Prince has become a widely known figure in television ministry and Christian mass media.² He has authored several popular self-help books and routinely tours the global megachurch 'circuit'. As a result, New Creation services are largely grounded in his status as charismatic figurehead. Somewhat paradoxically, the use of mass commercial venues and virtual services accompanies this individual centrality. The study thus examines both charisma and organisational structure, particularly as they intersect with space and locality. Drawing on Marc Augé's formulation of the 'supermodern non-place', it considers how individual charisma is delocalised across the institution of the megachurch.³ The study's methodology comprises ethnographic fieldwork at the weekly Star Vista services as well as the virtual 'satellite' services, engaging in both observation and casual interviews where possible. A comparative approach to 'home' and 'satellite' services pushes these issues of (dis)location to the fore.

¹ "About Us." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

² "Pastor Joseph and Wendy Prince." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

³ Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995. Web.

Introduction:

The anthropological study of Christian megachurches has so far focused primarily on single-site institutions within the United States. Although historically traceable to North America, a great majority of the world's largest megachurches are now located in non-Western settings.¹ As some studies have pointed out, however, this pattern is more directly related to global capitalism than any particular form of Christianity.² Using theories of spatial modernity and the 'non-place' as described by Marc Augé, these studies have explained the megachurch as "a direct effect of contemporary capitalism's incessant incursion into ever more areas of life."³ The megachurch then becomes a translation of commercial bureaucracy into the religious sphere. It is rendered a 'non-place' in the sense of being removed from historical or cultural context, via distancing from 'traditional Christian churches' and re-alignment with "entertainment, self-help, and retail".⁴ While commenting on the status of the physical place itself, existing literature has yet to examine how 'delocalisation' occurs for charismatic leadership within the institution of the megachurch.

In response, this ethnographic paper explores the relationship between charisma, institutional structure, and physical space in New Creation non-denominational megachurch. Now the

largest church in Singapore, New Creation Church (NCC) was founded in 1984 and currently boasts a registered congregation of 31,000.⁵ It has since expanded from its original site into six different service venues around the country. All of these venues are public, commercial spaces such as concert halls, theatres, or ballrooms. The physical service is conducted by Senior Pastor Joseph Prince only at the Star Performing Arts Centre (Star PAC), whilst being live-streamed to the other five venues for virtual services. Since his appointment in 1990, Pastor Prince has become a widely known figure in television ministry and Christian mass media.⁶ He has authored several popular self-help books and routinely tours the global megachurch 'circuit'. As a result, New Creation services are largely grounded in his status as charismatic figurehead. Somewhat paradoxically, the use of mass commercial venues and virtual services accompanies the individual as focal point. The study thus examines both charisma and institutional structure, particularly as they intersect with space and locality. Drawing on Marc Augé's formulation of the 'supermodern non-place', it considers how individual charisma is delocalised across the institution of the megachurch.⁷ This benefits existing literature on religious charisma as much as theories of the 'non-place', by grounding both in a new framework of "charisma at a distance".⁸ The study's methodology comprises

¹ Adogame, Afo. "Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in a Global Perspective." *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 498. Web.

² Sanders, G. "Religious Non-Places: Corporate Megachurches and Their Contributions to Consumer Capitalism." *Critical Sociology*. Web. 2014.

³ IBID. 1.

⁴ IBID.

⁵ "About Us." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

⁶ "Pastor Joseph and Wendy Prince." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

⁷ Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995. Web.

⁸ Weller, Robert P. "Asia and the Global Economies of Charisma." *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*. By Phatthanā Kiti'āsā. London: Routledge, 2008. 29. Web.

ethnographic fieldwork at the weekly Star Vista services as well as the virtual 'satellite' services. A comparative approach to 'home' and 'satellite' services then pushes these issues of (dis)location to the fore.

Theoretical Background:

Commodified Religion and the Economies of Charisma

Existing anthropological literature has yet to reconcile ideas of religious 'supermodernity' with individual charisma. The collective rationality of bureaucratic structure manages to hold the unique forces of charisma - that much is evident from the astounding popularity of New Creation. It then becomes a question of the practices and logics which enable the institution to take on such charismatic 'charge'. How, in other words, does something as distinctive as individual charisma survive the rendering into generic, commercial institution? My approach to this problem involves first bringing the non-place into conversation with Max Weber's foundational work on capitalism and Protestant Christianity.⁹ Rather than accepting the Weberian framework wholesale, however, the study works to negotiate new links between institutions and charismatic leadership. The relationship between modern capitalism and global Christianity is more than a simple "elective affinity".¹⁰ Instead, the megachurch engages with numerous flows of capital - economic, social, and cultural - in different and sometimes contradictory ways. Robert Weller has identified the problem of 'global charisma' in similar questions as follows: "What happens... when video

becomes the primary carrier of charisma? What can hold such a religion together, and how do the structures and flows of religious world-systems relate to economic world-systems?"¹¹ That being said, Weller's relevant paper on the topic serves primarily as a statement of the issue rather than an attempt at its solution. This study aims to provide a set of possible responses.

Alongside its contributions to ideas of charismatic institutions and the 'non-place', the study enters into a larger field of the anthropology of globalisation and consumerism. New Creation represents one node in a growing, global network of Christian megachurches joined by flows of capital, media, and ideologies. Joseph Prince, for example, holds an international media presence through television ministry, books, and conference speeches. Megachurches themselves act as institutional mediators for increasingly global forms of Christianity. Globalisation is thus part and parcel of the construction of transient, ahistorical 'non-places'. A previous anthropological study of another megachurch in Singapore, City Harvest Church, relates these patterns to rampant, mass-market commercialisation: "...megachurches, despite operating in different kinds of marketplace [sic], have indeed displayed a striking similarity in their rationalization of production and consumption to those mass-production corporations...".¹² By relating the megachurch to the rising homogeneity of consumerism, this work on City Harvest gives

⁹ See: Weber, Max, Peter Baehr, and Gordon C. Wells. *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print.

¹⁰ IBID.

¹¹ Weller, *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, 24.

¹² Tong Kooi Chin, Joy. "McDonaldization and the Megachurches: A Case Study of City Harvest Church, Singapore." *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*. London: Routledge, 2008. Web.

further substance to the issues of globalisation raised above.

In discussing the relationship between globalisation and consumerism, my approach also draws on Arjun Appadurai's notion of the global cultural economy. Appadurai has defined this 'landscape' in terms of five 'scapes', including (most relevantly) the mediascape and ideoscape, to describe the new global relations between production and consumption.¹³ This approach is thereby rooted in Karl Marx's original formulation of commodity fetishism in *Capital*.¹⁴ Appadurai's contribution of 'production fetishism' is particularly helpful in the context of New Creation: "The locality [of the site of production, cultural or otherwise]... becomes a fetish which disguises the globally dispersed forces that actually drive the production process."¹⁵ This 'production fetishism' is something of a temporary antidote to the non-place; it takes global forces of cultural/media production for being under "local control".¹⁶ Following this vein, the study finally considers how such fetishization of locality plays out as a means of resisting 'unplacing' of the megachurch. Charisma at once follows and breaks from the gridlines of "global cultural flows" in order to achieve effective dislocation.¹⁷ In some ways, this marks a return to Marc Augé's original theorising about the creation of non-place through global capitalism. The delocalisation of charisma

then becomes an extension of this process, entailed in the commodification that underpins the non-place.

Through this case study of New Creation Church, my argument will illustrate the structures and technologies that enable the dislocation of religious charisma. Beginning with the physical spaces of Star Vista Theatre and a satellite venue (Marina Bay Sands), the study first moves through the key features of the 'home' and virtual services. This allows for direct comparison of the physical and live-stream service environments, particularly with regard to audience reception and participation. It then explores several critical themes such as entertainment and retail, 'playback services' (services based on the viewing of previous service recordings), and virtual mass healings. In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, I also analyse New Creation's production of media. The delocalisation of charismatic leadership occurs not only through live-streams within Singapore, but also through global television networks, books, and websites. These sources are a key element of the construction of Pastor Prince. My analysis will thus consider the embedded charisma of virtual representations as much as physical performances. I believe the totality of New Creation necessarily calls for the integration of ethnographic fieldwork with the study of this 'mediascape'. The benefits of such an integrative approach carry over in both directions - analysis enabling richer ethnography and ethnography helping to ground the analysis.

Case Study: New Creation Church, Singapore

Background and History of New Creation Church

Originally founded in 1984 in a public housing (HDB) estate, the congregation of New Creation grew slowly from 25 to 150 members in

¹³ Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture & Society* 7.2 (1990): 295-310. Web.

¹⁴ Tucker, Robert C., Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. "Capital." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1978. Print.

¹⁵ Appadurai, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 307.

¹⁶ IBID.

¹⁷ IBID. 296.

1990.¹⁸ Over the course of the following decade, NCC began an exponential rise to megachurch status, reaching 2,000 members by 1997 and 3,800 members by 1998.¹⁹ Internal literature attributes this meteoric surge to the charismatic leadership of Pastor Prince: "...his unanimous appointment as senior pastor in 1990 marked a turning point in the history of the church, which started experiencing phenomenal growth."²⁰ The direction of NCC shifted dramatically in 1997, however, following Prince's receipt of a message from God while on holiday with his wife in the Swiss Alps.²¹ This message is quoted below:

"If you don't preach pure, unadulterated grace, people's lives will never be gloriously blessed and gloriously transformed." This one statement that God made to Joseph Prince in 1997 completely transformed the way Joseph preached and taught the gospel. And thus began the Grace Revolution.²²

Prince then returned to Singapore and founded Joseph Prince Ministries Ltd (JPM). JPM serves as a major media production and distribution channel, broadcasting Prince's daily TV program *Destined to Reign* to "millions of homes across North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Israel on both secular

and Christian networks".²³ A year later, NCC opened its business arm - Rock Productions. Originally conceived as a "venue provider", Rock Productions built NCC's first dedicated service venue (a 1,400 seat auditorium at Suntec City Mall) in 1999. NCC services had till then been held in various hotel venues on a rotating basis. Rock Productions has since come to encompass three other corporate ventures including Rock Gifts and Book Centre, Daystar Child Development Centre, and Omega Tours & Travel (specialising in tours of historical religious sites in Israel).²⁴ NCC continued to expand rapidly in the midst of these developments. By 2004, the NCC congregation had surpassed 10,000.²⁵ The following six years would see a doubling of this figure.²⁶ In response to such immense growth, Rock Productions commissioned a new 5,000 seat auditorium in 2007. The result is the Star Performing Arts Centre (Star PAC), inaugurated with its first NCC service on December 23, 2012. As NCC states, "It [Star PAC] is available for secular bookings throughout the week but New Creation Church is its anchor tenant on Sundays."²⁷ As of 2015, NCC is the largest registered church in Singapore with a total congregation of 31,000.

The Star

Before addressing charisma specifically, it benefits us to consider the physical structures and technologies that allow the 'unplating' of NCC at the

¹⁸ "History." *New Creation Church*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

¹⁹ "The Ministry". *Joseph Prince Ministries*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

²⁰ "About Us." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

²¹ "The Ministry". *Joseph Prince Ministries*.

²² IBID.

²³ "Broadcast Listings". *Joseph Prince Ministries*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

²⁴ *Factsheet on New Creation Church's Business Entities*. Publication. New Creation Church, 1 June 2015. Web.

²⁵ "History." *New Creation Church*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

²⁶ IBID.

²⁷ *Factsheet on New Creation Church's Business Entities*, New Creation Church.

Star PAC itself. Again returning to Augé, this process involves a concerted distancing from historical and cultural reference. Such ‘unplacing’ is mediated first and foremost through the space and design of the Star PAC. Based within the futuristic Star Vista Shopping Centre, the Star PAC is perched above three floors of high-end commercial space. Restaurants, cafes, and electronics stores wrap around a sleek, stainless steel-and-glass outdoor space converging on a ground floor amphitheatre. There is a certain element of capitalism as spectacle at Star Vista. At the entrance to the Star PAC foyer, two sets of escalators allow for an open, elevated view across the entire atrium. The atrium then passes out of view as the escalators enter a tunnel layered in reflective surfaces and bland white lights. At the top of the escalators, a small outlet of the Rock Gifts and Book Centre retails ‘Joseph Prince Essentials’, healing resources, and recordings of recent sermons. On Sundays, these escalators mark a porous dividing line between the CapitaLand shopping centre and the space of NCC. Teams of volunteer ushers greet church members as they proceed from level to level, receiving a cheery but efficient “Welcome to church!” at each stage. Every usher I encountered always used exactly this phrase; not once did I hear a more specific “Welcome to New Creation!”. NCC pastors also use this generic, stand-alone ‘church’ to address the congregation as a whole during services. The actual name ‘New Creation’ is only seldom spoken. Whether or not coordinated by policy, this has the rhetorical effect of universalising NCC as the modern Christian experience. It is not only non-denominational but also implicitly *post*-denominational.

These ‘unplacing’ technologies continue into the Star’s main auditorium. Aside from the

communion kits (sealed, mass-produced kits of crackers and grape juice) handed out at the final doorway, the actual service space is unmarked by any physical symbols of Christianity. Throughout the entire space of the auditorium, images of Christ



The Star Vista atrium.

Source: *International Enterprise*

or crosses are conspicuously absent. The stage is set up with rock band equipment and the atmospheric blue glow of concert lighting. A series of large crystal-like structures jut up into the stage centre. On the mega-screen behind the stage, digital animations of colourful galaxies, space, and stars float around the main square of video. Each NCC service is recorded and streamed by an extensive videography system. On the main stage, this stream displays close-ups of the current speaker, individual audience members, or wide-pans of the entire congregation. These camera fixtures are often overt and occasionally dramatic - for example, a large swinging boom crane or portable rigs rolling through the aisles. The process of streaming and recording thereby becomes an independent spectacle, rendering the congregation into performance for both itself and posterity. Indeed, as will be expanded later, these recordings also serve as the basis for NCC’s ‘playback services’.



The Star Vista. Many of my informants described Star Vista as a 'spaceship'. Source: *Wikimedia*

Aside from these features of physical space, Star services also deploy a variety of entertainment and media technologies including, most importantly, music. Each service begins with a thump of the bass drum and ring of the electric guitar. The congregation then rises to its feet in response, hands raised or clapping. Two choir groups walk onto each side of the stage, followed by 5-6 'lead' singers out front all wearing concert-style clothing - slick leather jackets, vests, hair done up with gel or highlights. As the band gains momentum, a thundering sound system comes to life as glittering riffs reverberate through the aisles. This concert-like performance, called 'praise and worship' by one of my informants, constitutes the first half-hour of every NCC service. Most of the songs are produced by New Creation Worship Media, a division of the Rock Gifts and Book Centre. These songs are all accompanied by a professional lyrics video, which again reproduces the sleek, 'cosmic' ambiance of the stage background. A block of text flashes on screen to display each song's name, copyright information, and song ID number (if produced by NCC). The tithing (donation) period

is often also soundtracked by performance - once of a gospel song on ukulele, followed by a hard rock/pop dance performance in the K-pop style (e.g. tight black pants, white shoes, wide caps, baseball uniform T-shirts). Meanwhile, the stage screen depicts an image of a back alley full of graffiti. Once again, through this re-alignment with globalised forms of popular culture and "entertainment, self-help, and retail", NCC is effectively distanced from 'traditional' Christian church settings.²⁸

The Satellites

The charisma of Pastor Prince is mediated by virtuality; out of the six Sunday service venues, five are digital broadcasts of the 'real' home service at Star Vista. Moreover, only the first two services (out of four) every Sunday are live sermons by Pastor Prince himself. The final two services retain the live 'praise and worship' section, but generally use a playback of the second service for the sermon portion. The primary and most popular of the satellite venues is Marina Bay Sands Ballroom. This venue is located within the larger Marina Bay Sands casino and shopping complex, above floors of ultra-high-end shops to the likes of Gucci and Louis Vuitton. On the bottom floor, an artificial river flows through the entire complex. Small boats ferry shoppers along the river, each captained by a standing paddle-man in an attempt at Venice. As 'passengers' are conveyed along these crystal waters under the shopping complex, they are surrounded with towering structures of polished steel, glass, and luxury cafes. As with Star Vista, global capitalism is rendered into spectacle. This is all clearly visible from the escalator approaching the ballrooms on the third floor.

²⁸ Sanders, *Critical Sociology*, 2014.

Entering the ballroom lobby, the space is outfitted for NCC with numerous banners, volunteer-staffed 'Connect Points', and another outlet of the Rock Gifts and Book Centre. But again, depictions of Christ or the cross are nowhere to be found. The ballroom itself is set up with three projector screens and several hundred chairs arranged in straight rows. Unadorned beyond its gold veneer and carpeting, this is an unspecialised commercial venue setup. During my visit for the third (2:30PM) service, the ballroom gradually filled to near full capacity. Significantly, no one at Marina Bay physically introduces the beginning of the service. The only NCC representatives present are the floor ushers. Shortly thereafter, the live-stream from Star begins with a brief word before transitioning into the 'praise and worship' concert. The entire congregation of the ballroom rises to their feet, and begin singing along, clapping, and their raising hands as actively as the congregation at the Star. Many of the live-stream shots are taken from a wide-pan audience camera behind the bottom floor of the auditorium. This allows the congregation at the Star PAC to indicate the 'proper' response to the service for audiences at the satellite venues. In the case of NCC, these physical structures of 'unplacement' run parallel with the distancing of the megachurch within the ideological sphere of Christianity.

Prosperity and the Ambiguity of Grace

The core ideological position of NCC falls in line with a broader notion of the 'prosperity gospel'. Joseph Prince summarised the basic foundation of this 'gospel' in a recent sermon.

Jesus is not just about saving you from hell into heaven, that's what the concept a lot of people have about salvation. But

He is to bring heaven into your hell right now, to bring heaven into your earthly living... He has heavenly answers for your earthly ills. [*sic*]²⁹

In the American context, the prosperity gospel is often linked directly with financial 'blessing' or 'favour'. At NCC, however, the idea appears to be somewhat more nebulous. Financial prosperity was not explicitly referenced in any of the sermons or media I viewed during my fieldwork. Most services concluded with a more general blessing of the week ahead, specifically that it be "your best week yet".³⁰ The American televangelist Marilyn Hickey reinforced this undefined 'prosperity' during her visiting sermon at NCC: "I know God wants you to be a success. I know God wants you to be prosperous."³¹

Perhaps more relevant for NCC than the prosperity gospel is their own notion of 'grace' and the 'Grace Revolution'. The JPM website describes this in the context of Prince's 1997 message from God, wherein "God told him that he had not been preaching grace, and gave him the mandate to preach grace—pure and unadulterated. This meant preaching about God's grace without attempting to balance, or mix, it with the law. [*sic*]"³² As one of my informants elaborated, grace refers to the undeserved yet unconditional nature of salvation. A follower of the 'Grace Revolution' is "fed" by grace: "That's what Christ died to give you... just receive."³³ The language of receipt also pervades the sermons of NCC, especially in the context of the

²⁹ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

³⁰ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 1, 2015.

³¹ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

³² "The Ministry". *Joseph Prince Ministries*.

³³ Interview conducted on November 25, 2015.

tithing period. In the words of a junior pastor, “...you don't need to earn Christ's grace, it is given to you for free”.³⁴ This is sometimes embedded in catchphrases such as “dare to receive”. Of course, the receipt of grace is not without obligation of reciprocity. As once stated before tithing: “Don't give so that He will give to you, He has already given to you. Now you can give back.”³⁵ NCC then comes to stand in for the divine as the proper recipient of (now monetary) repayment.

While cast in separate terms from the prosperity gospel, NCC's conception of grace is certainly aligned to earthly well-being. The ‘Grace Revolution’ thereby works to establish rhetorical distance between NCC and more particular, denominational forms of Christianity. It is the ideological complement of NCC's ‘unplacement’ from historical and cultural context. The marked absence of conventional Christian symbols or rites - particularly baptism, which is not practiced in NCC - further emphasises such distance. In light of these general structures and technologies, let us turn to the specific problem of the dislocation of charisma.

Playback Services

Every week, the sermons of the third and fourth Sunday services are playbacks of the video recording of the second service. The use of ‘playback services’ was further intensified during my period of fieldwork, as Joseph Prince was away on his Grace Revolution Tour of the United States. Importantly, the transition from the live ‘praise and worship’ section into these recordings is often unmarked by any introduction or context. The shift of the service from a physical event on stage to the virtual sermon on screen appears to be unremarkable. The singers

and junior pastors exit the side doors silently. They are soon replaced by a close-up shot of Pastor Prince, whose face fills the main screen while accompanied by a full body shot on two equally large side screens.

From time to time, the main screen switches to a slideshow of the sermon's relevant Bible verses. Meanwhile the two side screens remain focused on Prince, whose recorded image is now conveniently pointing up toward the main screen. This slideshow is in fact required, as hardcopy Bibles are almost completely obsolete in NCC (I never saw one). Some congregation members shuffle through their mobile phones' ‘Bible apps’ in efforts to save favourite verses or keep pace with the sermon. Notably, camera crews continue filming the audience during this playback portion of service - at this point only capturing the congregation's response. To be sure, the general response and engagement of the congregation with the recording is far from passive. The audience consistently responds to his calls for ‘amens’ (“Can I get a good amen?”), in addition to applause, laughter, and gestures of agreement. For the entire 90-minute duration of Prince's sermon, the stage itself is dark and empty, yet the atmosphere and energy of the service not only remains but perhaps even gains in intensity. The only NCC staff remaining are the security guards on the side aisles.

³⁴ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

³⁵ IBID.

Prince himself often caters for these playback services with direct addresses to the camera, wherein he emphasises the independence of



Joseph Prince gives a sermon at a ‘playback service’. October 25, 2015. 2:30PM service. Photo by the author.

his message from distance or time. This factors into Prince’s larger rhetoric of the omnipresence of his message, particularly in connection with his own direct revelations. Indeed, Prince’s message from God, reportedly received on holiday in 1997, is given in quote marks on the JPM website as a word-for-word transcription.³⁶ Prince thus self-describes as an “instrument” of ‘the Word’, implicitly identifying with the transcendence of the message he claims to communicate.³⁷ As a junior pastor reaffirmed:

A ‘Grace Revolution’ is when you meet Jesus - it could be sitting in this auditorium, it could be you listening to Pastor [Prince] preaching on a CD, you know, whilst you’re driving or whilst you’re on the train. You know if there’s a breakdown you can listen more. Or you know, I don’t know, it could be you

are just meditating on the Word or you are just taking the Holy Communion, and you suddenly encounter - you don’t just do something - you encounter, you listen, you meditate, you partake, you just have a revelation. You meet Jesus, right, and you encounter his Grace.³⁸

By de-contextualising the sermon in time and space, Prince’s charismatic authority is diffused in parallel with ‘the Word’. The CD - the recording - is a conduit for Prince’s message, which itself appeals to the omnipresence of God’s Truth. Lim later refers to Prince’s latest book (*Grace Revolution*) as simply ‘the book’, appropriating this common term for the Bible. These commodified objects and media serve as modes of Prince’s transmission within Appadurai’s framework of the global cultural economy.³⁹ Their claim to the universal, timeless ‘Word’ is concomitant with the diffusion of the Senior Pastor as persona.

Mass Healings and the ‘Growth, Tumour, Wart Woman’

In a sermon entitled ‘Keys to Healing in the Hebrew Language’ (October 25, 2015), Prince recounts his study of healing methods via the “original” Hebrew. Upon completing this study, Prince speaks of having experienced a pre-emptive “spiritual attack” by the Devil, designed to thwart his sharing of the methods: “On my receiving revelation from God in my study, all of a sudden I had this feeling of my whole body was hot and it’s like an allergic breakout, my face started getting red and there are patches of red all over my body. I’ve

³⁶ “The Ministry”. *Joseph Prince Ministries*.

³⁷ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

³⁸ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

³⁹ Appadurai, *Theory, Culture & Society*.

never experienced that before [sic].”⁴⁰ Prince goes on to describe how medical tests found nothing. His wife (Wendy Prince) had explained to him that “you’re on the verge of something powerful, a revelation on healing, that the Devil doesn’t want you to share.”⁴¹ Prince then attempts to practice this healing method on the congregation at large. This sermon was recorded during the second Sunday service. For the 2:30PM playback service, then, the task of healing fell to the recording of Prince on screen. Invoking Christ, Prince commands (in English) that the congregation members’ bodies be rid of disease, that any cancer cells die, that tumours disappear, and that the previously immobile parts of any body be able to move again. After finishing, his recording asks the audience to raise and wave their arms as symbol of health, or to rotate the shoulders and bend the knees that had been locked. Many members of the playback congregation stand up in response, gesturing to indicate the effects of this healing. In other words, a pre-recorded video of Prince performs a real-time healing on the current audience, with some members responding positively. Others even turn in the directions Prince’s image points within the auditorium, where audience members of the recorded service had stretched their limbs or raised their hands. Prince’s charismatic authority was effectively removed from time whilst maintaining its distinctive force. This process was critically structured, however, by the space of the Star PAC. In being common to both the recording and the current (playback) service, the auditorium conveyed the social signals and spatial indicators of the recording into the present congregation.

⁴⁰ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

⁴¹ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

Two weeks later, NCC hosted the prominent American televangelist Marilyn Hickey. As with the regular playback services, Hickey delivered a live sermon for only the first and second service timings. The third timing, which I attended, was again a playback. Following a brief live sermon by a junior pastor, the service ‘hands over’ to Hickey’s sermon without any indication that this will be a recording. The transition from physical stage presence to virtual image is again unacknowledged, as with Prince’s playback services. Hickey’s recording receives a round of applause and welcome. The congregation immediately begins responding to her words - whether calls for amen, directions to repeat certain words, or phrases and verses. As the service continues, Hickey’s image repeatedly asks the congregation to stand up and hold their hands across their hearts while repeating after her. By the fifth time out of their chairs, some awkward laughs have begun to circulate as some begin looking around for group consensus on whether to continue standing. But ultimately the congregation follows along without exception. Again, the use of recorded shots of the previous congregation (all standing) indicates that the present audience should respond likewise. Toward the end of the service, Hickey shifts her focus onto healing and her passion for ‘Word of Faith’ (though she did not use this term) healing methods. She begins with an invocation to pray for those with heart problems.

If you have a heart problem would you please stand up? Because God can give you a new heart. Just stand up! All over, upstairs, downstairs... and I’m thinking of these wonderful people that I ministry to not only at the Star but at Marina Bay Sands and the cinemas.

Stand up! Get your heart. New heart.
Healed heart. Perfect heart. Amen?
Spare parts in heaven, God is dropping
a new heart on you. Yes He is! [sic]⁴²

Many tens of people in the playback service stand up in response to Hickey's call. Once again, a real-time healing is performed by a pre-recorded image. Unlike Prince's healing, however, Hickey draws on the collective congregation as a medium of transmission. In the process of healing, she calls on the audience to raise their hands toward someone standing and repeat after her:

Father, in the name of Jesus, I send the Word into this heart, the word heals, and delivers from every destruction, this afternoon, new hearts are happening in our church, *all over, everyone watching this*, who has a problem with their heart, is getting a new heart, in Jesus' name. Amen!
Amen! [sic; italics mine]⁴³

The healing efficacy of these words is dislocated via recitation of 'the Word', before being relocated in the bodily conduit of the congregation's outstretched arms. Hickey soon performs this process again for those with other medical ailments. She explains her belief that she has a gift for one practice in particular: "I love to pray for those with growths and tumours and warts. And I believe I have a special ability for it. My husband said to me: You are a growth, tumour, wart woman... I'm telling you, you can get rid of growths and tumours and

warts."⁴⁴ As during the heart healing, Hickey's recording asks the congregation to participate in the healing process directly. The playback service follows suit.

So if you have growths or tumours or warts, stand up. This is your miracle afternoon, stand up, and all over - *whoever's watching* - get up, get your miracle! You could lose weight! ... So extend your hand toward someone who's standing. Pray with me. We're going to send the Word. [sic; italics mine]⁴⁵

The congregation again repeats after Hickey in the healing prayer, with the addition that "they [the warts] are cursed in Jesus' name. They wither, dry up, disappear, in Jesus' name. Amen!"⁴⁶ Significantly, Hickey emphasises the immediacy of the healing process.

Now don't sit down if you're standing, don't sit down if you're standing! Check yourself. Always look for your miracle. Is the growth gone? Is it smaller? Is it turning colour? If you can tell a difference, wave at me. If you can tell a difference. You don't have it? Good, I see people waving. Amen! So just look for your miracle...[sic]⁴⁷

Again, several in the current playback service wave at the screen. The congregation gives

⁴² Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

⁴³ IBID.

⁴⁴ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

⁴⁵ IBID.

⁴⁶ IBID

⁴⁷ IBID

Hickey's recording a round of applause. In the event that a miracle was not observed, Hickey adds that "if you don't see any change right now, you don't give up, right? The game is not over till we win. Right? I have to win. You have to win. [sic]"⁴⁸ This blatant expression of the 'prosperity gospel' appears recurrently in the mass healings conducted at NCC. Indeed, the 'Word of Faith' healing method is particularly amenable to mass distribution and marketization. Anyone, anywhere with access to the text of the relevant healing prayer can practice its tenets. As a junior pastor affirmed after Hickey's playback sermon:

And as you keep meditating on healing, on the living Word, I declare to every person *under the sound of my voice*, I declare you shall receive your abundant portion...I declare you shall possess your possessions... I declare you shall drink from wells you never dug, live in houses you didn't build, because you know what? Jesus caused your enemies to build them for you. [sic; italics mine]⁴⁹

By imbuing the force or effective power of 'the Word' into the act of reciting the words themselves, the charismatic authority of the original speaker is transmitted in parallel - whether it be Hickey or the junior pastor. Prince achieves an equivalent effect through his own healing prayer, albeit without audience participation. The atemporality of these words is a key element of the transmission. There is a dislocation in time as much as space.

Baptism Without Water:

Media and Commodification

Aside from playback and virtual services, the 'unplacing' of both Joseph Prince and NCC as an institution also occurs via media production. Here the concept of 'Word of Faith' extends beyond the context of healing, to act as a general technology for mediating dislocation. This is illustrated perhaps most effectively in the practice of baptism (or lack thereof) in NCC. The customary ritual of baptism into the Christian faith is generally marked by an immersion of the body in water, as presided over by an ordained pastor. NCC does not, however, conduct any physical ritual of baptism. The rite of acceptance into the Christian faith is instead comprised of verbal recitation. This occurs at the end of every Sunday NCC service, when the speaking pastor asks anyone who would like to "receive Jesus for the first time" to repeat after them in prayer.⁵⁰ The content and phrasing of the prayer itself is improvised. Once complete, the pastor invariably asks all new converts to collect a Joseph Prince CD pack and 31-day devotional plan from NCC's 'Connect Points' at the Star and Marina Bay.

That being said, physical presence at an NCC service (either 'real' or virtual) is not necessary to receive the induction by prayer. The back label of Joseph Prince CD recordings, for example, also offers the text of an induction prayer for recitation. This is prefaced by the brief direction: "If you would like to receive all that Jesus has done for you and make Him your Lord and Saviour, please say this prayer..."⁵¹ The 'Word' is thereby rendered into a material commodity, becoming dislocated through a

⁴⁸ IBID

⁴⁹ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

⁵⁰ Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 15, 2015.

⁵¹ Joseph Prince. *Keys to Healing in the Hebrew Language*. Joseph Prince Ministries, 2015. CD.

process akin to George Ritzer's 'McDonaldization'.⁵² Joy Tong has related this to City Harvest Church with the argument that "megachurches, despite operating in different kinds of marketplace [from McDonald's], have indeed displayed a striking similarity in their rationalisation of production and consumption...".⁵³ The commodification of NCC is transformed into a conduit for the 'Word', which is then repeated and re-materialised by the voice of the consumer. Under this schema, material products are only a conduit of charismatic authority. Charisma is, rather, dislocated through the 'Word' and then relocated in the bodily acts and utterances of its audience. The process then becomes twofold; first in the dislocation through digital or material commodity, and second through its reproduction in the physical world of the consumer. This invites the analogy with Appadurai's notion of "production fetishism". NCC's media production, though global and transnational, is rephrased in the "idiom and spectacle of local control".⁵⁴ As a result, NCC, its media, and its pastors are able to resist the total dislocation that would otherwise accompany the non-place.

The Structures and Technologies of Dislocation

The dislocation of charisma occurs via a configuration of various structures - spatial, ideological, and rhetorical. These adaptable frameworks are not specific to Joseph Prince as individual, but rather are embedded across the institution of NCC. As observed in mass healings, Marilyn Hickey is dislocated via the same structures

and technologies as apply to Prince himself. The success of Hickey as recording is a result of NCC's endorsement and selective application of such technologies, almost regardless of pre-existing reputation or persona. Here I summarise and synthesise the major elements of this process.

First let us return to the 'unplacing' of NCC through the physical spaces and practices of global capitalism. The spatial environment of both the Star PAC and Marina Bay Sands is patterned by mass commercialism and entertainment technologies, which in turn divorce NCC from more traditional church settings. Stained glass, cathedrals, and the pews are replaced by global capitalism as spectacle. This is evidenced at all levels of the physical space, beginning with the racks of 'Joseph Prince Essentials', DVDs, CDs, books, and other NCC resources available through the Rock Gifts and Book Centre outside the Star PAC. Meanwhile inside the auditorium, dramatic setups of swinging boom rigs and broadcast cameras accompany the mega-screens, electric guitars, and cosmic blue lighting of the main stage. In the context of playback services, the auditorium also serves to convey the social signals and spatial indicators of recordings into the present congregation. As observed more poetically by Walter Benjamin, "...the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition."⁵⁵

These physical structures of 'unplacement' mirror NCC's position within the ideological sphere of Christianity. Specifically, the concept of grace and the 'Grace Revolution' establish rhetorical distance between NCC and more historical, denominational forms of Christianity.

⁵² Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2004. Print.

⁵³ Tong Kooi Chin, Joy, *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, 186.

⁵⁴ Appadurai, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 306.

⁵⁵ Benjamin, Walter, and Hannah Arendt. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999. 215. Print.

This falls in line with the basic principle of the 'prosperity gospel' - to "bring heaven into your earthly living". Unlike the wealth-centric American interpretation of prosperity, however, NCC deploys a less well-defined mix of 'success' and health. The absence of conventional Christian symbols or rites including baptism, crosses, and Bibles, plays further into this ambiguity. In effect, NCC attempts to become post-denominational. The 'unplacing' of NCC as an institution then leads to the problem of "charisma at a distance". How, in other words, does the charismatic authority of the megachurch and its pastors survive in the context of live-streams, playback services, and global media?

My response to this problem negotiates a new relationship between the 'Word of Faith' movement and forces of commodification. In brief review, the 'Word of Faith' doctrine holds that certain words and utterances are imbued with divine power. The acts of hearing and verbalising these utterances themselves contain the effective force of the 'Word'. 'Word of Faith' thereby comes to serve as a technology of dislocation, as demonstrated in the context of both mass healings and 'baptisms without water' or induction by prayer. Nonetheless, there is a marked difference in the modes of healing employed by Hickey, and Prince and the junior pastor respectively. Both Prince and the junior pastor use authoritative prayer cast to all 'under the sound' of their voice, which the audience then experiences through passive receipt. In contrast, Hickey relies on a collective recitation and sending of the 'Word' via the bodily acts and utterances of an actively involved congregation. Both modes are founded on the intrinsic power of the 'Word' and achieve similar shows of success. I propose, however, that Hickey's approach is in fact more reflective of NCC's structure as a whole. The dislocation of charismatic authority through the

commodified sound or text of the 'Word' must be accompanied by a relocation into the consumer. This is observed in NCC's inductions by prayer, playback services, and media more generally. Here I refute Robert Weller's dichotomy between centrifugal and centripetal models of charisma, namely that charisma either "flows out from the centre to its periphery" or vice-versa.⁵⁶ The dislocation of charisma is not a question of the intensity of point source individuals - in other words, of the authoritative 'signal' being strong enough to overcome geographic and temporal distance. But nor is it a centripetal case of "bringing followers to the centre".⁵⁷ Rather, charisma is dislocated in the moment of its relocation into a network of 'satellite' sources. Charisma is impotent without this relocation. It can move through the commodified conduits of 'Word of Faith' and media production, but must always be reproduced in the bodily acts and utterances of its audience.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated Marc Augé's idea of the 'non-place' at New Creation Church, where forces of global capitalism and popular culture engender distance from historical and cultural context. Specifically, the transformation of NCC into 'non-place' occurs through a configuration of spatial, ideological, and rhetorical devices. The spectacles of capitalism that are Star Vista and Marina Bay Sands remove NCC from the line of 'tradition' in Christianity. Similarly, the prosperity gospel and 'Grace Revolution' create ideological ambiguity and a sense of the post-denominational. Yet in creating such distance, these configurations at

⁵⁶ Weller, *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, 25.

⁵⁷ *IBID.* 26.

once challenge NCC's intimate dependence on charismatic authority. I have proposed a new relationship between commodification and the 'Word of Faith' movement as a potential means of reconciling this tension. The dislocation of charisma is neither 'centripetal' nor 'centrifugal' relative to a point source individual (e.g. Joseph Prince), but rather diffuse and networked across the body of followers. This process then becomes twofold; first in the transmission of charisma through digital or material commodity, and second through its reproduction in the acts and utterances of its consumer. If, as Benjamin writes, "[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity", what could be more authentic than the lived embodiment of one's own self?⁵⁸

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⁵⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 214.