

BOOK REVIEW

CASSELBERRY, Judith. *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 232pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9780822369035. \$25.95.

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Women comprise the majority in black Apostolic congregations. The same is historically true of most Pentecostal congregations and denominations. Casselberry takes readers into the daily operations of these gendered dynamics at the True Deliverance Church of the Apostolic Faith Inc. (TDC), a oneness Pentecostal congregation in Queens, New York City, affiliated with the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ (COOLJC). Women have historically comprised approximately 75 to 80 per cent of the active adult membership in the COOLJC (pp. 5, 95–6). Thus, to study COOLJC congregations without a consideration of the work of women is a major oversight. Students of Pentecostalism do well to take note of how Casselberry brings the work of women to the foreground through participant-observation, attending a variety of services, conducting in-depth interviews and oral histories of church elders, synthesizing surveys results, and video recording church services (p. 12).

Casselberry begins by reframing the questions about Pentecostalism, labour and power. She queries, “what are the ways in which adherents define, understand, experience, and exhibit spiritual authority? To what extent does spiritual authority enable a particular form of Black female power in a male-headed religious community?” Second, Casselberry asks, “[w]hat specific work do women have to do to become holy and live a holy Black womanhood in patriarchal spaces, which they are instrumental in (re-)producing?” (p. 10). While maintaining that the church has been a primary site of black female labour, she argues that as a site of both labour and faith, the church is invested with black female power. Across six chapters she demonstrates how four discreet domains of faith labour (organizational, emotional, intimate and aesthetic) coalesce in black church life.

The book begins with the immediate aftermath of the passing of a 46-year-old sister Franklin TDC. Casselberry holds up in sharp relief what the labour of faith feels, looks, tastes and even smells like. The labour of faith is found in the hours of monotonous cooking and cleaning: “on this party day, the kitchen was abuzz with women from church preparing volumes of food to take outside. Two fans ran at top speed in a vain attempt to alleviate the heat of bodies, the ovens, burners on the stove, and steaming pots” (p. 20). These rich descriptions, which nearly take the reader to the scene of the events, are one of the book’s key

strengths and help the reader understand the multi-sensory and multi-layered labour in Pentecostal church life. The disposition of the women of the church towards labour is perhaps best captured in a response to the passing of Sister Franklin: “Walking with Christ means you decide about how you gonna act all the time” (p. 44).

The historian of Pentecostalism will delight in the pathbreaking work in Chapters 2 and 3 on women’s organizational labour in COOLJC history. Barring a few seminal works, very little scholarly attention has been paid to the historical dimensions of the COOLJC. Casselberry’s findings corroborate my own earlier work on the COOLJC, namely that the founder Robert Lawson fashioned a “distinctive Pentecostal space” (p. 47) by his views on racial uplift and afro-biblical readings. This chapter’s major intervention in Pentecostal history is the interpretation of *structural* labour of faith in building overlapping organizations as seen in the lives and ministries of Carrie Lawson, Evelyn Lawson, Ethel Mae Bonner and Reva Cook. These four women embody various aspects of the labour of faith as detailed in the remaining four chapters. Chapter 3 lays out how three different women auxiliaries (denominational networks of labour) have long provided the space for women (both minister’s wives and lay) to undertake spiritual endeavours which indeed exhibit their organizational genius. Casselberry convincingly demonstrates how the “[t]he episcopate of COOLJC provides a system for men’s distinction and elevation in rank that circumvents, yet depends on, women’s network of labor to sustain the institution” (p. 90).

Chapter 4 reveals the emotional labour of women as they navigate through the contradictions of power at play at TDC, an interconnected web of ironies at the nexus of Pentecostalism, gender and race. While the women at TDC maintain that they “are the ones pushing the church, and lifting, and everything, doing most of the stuff” (p. 104), men assume leadership roles but only because women see themselves as exercising the power to submit. Women “lead from the background” and enact tactics of acceptable disobedience, which at times, overwhelm the power of men without disrupting the power relations (pp. 111–13). This fine book is at its best in Chapter 5, particularly for its interdisciplinary intervention and blurring of assumptions about where to locate the labour of women. The chapter examines the intricacies of altar work through the lens of intimate labour in order to shed light on the emotional caring and reproductive labour of women. Women have comprised the majority of altar workers for at least four generations. As such, they have been training one another in the art of working the altar, as it is essential, not incidental, in COOLJC praxis. Such an analysis allows for a spatial reading that de-centres the sermon and places women of colour “at the center of atonement” (p. 55). Finally, Chapter 6 fills a major lacuna in the interdisciplinary work on a notable feature of (Oneness) Pentecostalism: holiness dress codes. Casselberry conceives of these dress codes and their attendant theologies, performances and representations as the “aesthetics of labor”, giving scholars of Pentecostalism a robust framework to understand the body.

In all, Casselberry’s attention to labour, gender and power complements the scholarship on the materially rich and evolving world of gendered Pentecostalism across the Americas, in part examined by Elaine Lawless, Margaret Poloma,

Elizabeth Brusco, Cheryl Sanders, Anthea Butler and Leah Payne. Photographs (as the cover illustrates) would provide readers with some visual representation of the material world Casselberry deftly describes. *The Labor of Faith* can claim masterful organization and readability, making for it ideal for use in undergraduate courses and graduate seminars.