
BOOK REVIEW

Barron, Jessica M. and Rhys H. Williams. 2017. *The Urban Church Imagined: Religion, Race, and Authenticity in the City*. New York: New York University Press. viii + 240pp. ISBN: 978-1-4798-7766-9 \$89 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-4798-8710-1 \$30.00 (pbk).

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Downtown Church is an evangelical Protestant congregation that self-consciously markets itself as a church in and for the city of Chicago—at least, the version of the city imagined by the church’s leaders. As Barron and Williams explain in *The Urban Church Imagined*, the leaders of this congregation explicitly target a certain segment of the Chicago population—the “young, upwardly-mobile, and hip” (p. 4). The desired image of Downtown Church is one of urban “authenticity”, a vision imbued with racial significance.

Weaving together the concepts of consumption, place and identity, Barron and Williams conceptualize their findings by introducing the “racialized urban imaginary”, a congregational identity marker for Downtown Church that exploits race, gender, class and place to promote an idealized version of the church. At Downtown Church, racial diversity becomes one more good to be consumed in a city characterized by cultured consumption. “Managed diversity”, another key concept, refers to the strategies through which the leaders negotiate issues of congregational diversity. The leaders curate the racial make-up of the church so that diversity is made palatable to middle-class white consumers. Additionally, the related concept of “racial utility” describes the strategies leveraged by church leaders in order to construct a public image of sophisticated racial diversity. There is a select group of black men, for example, who have been judged suitably attractive to serve as greeters. These black bodies are exploited by the church leadership in their attempt to appeal to a certain class of urban consumers.

What are the effects of the racialized urban imaginary, managed diversity, and racial utility? Barron and Williams enumerate the ways in which inequality is affirmed and reproduced through these ideologies. Women of colour who serve in visible positions, for example, are pressured to conform to European beauty standards. And although the pastors do not explicitly condemn interracial marriage, the interracial couples at Downtown Church meet in a secret group in order to escape the pastors’ overbearing interference. Though Barron and Williams explain the racial strategies leveraged by the leadership at great length, they offer a somewhat muted criticism. While the authors indict the pastoral leadership for their perpetuation of inequality, their restrained critique fails to hold these

leaders accountable for the ways in which they actively manipulate and exploit black and brown members.

Methodologically, Barron and Williams integrate findings from participant observation and interviews with a content analysis of sermons, marketing materials and web content. Both authors engaged in participant observation over the course of a year and a half, joining members in a variety of activities, including dinners, leadership meetings and social events. First author Barron conducted the 35 ethnographic interviews and 20 semi-structured interviews with the church's staff and attendees, and she collected all of the empirical data. Substantial excerpts from the authors' fieldnotes are included frequently throughout the text, to good effect; these narratives offer thick description that contextualizes the participants' narratives and illuminates the nature of the interactions between members and the leadership.

Findings from the content analysis of the church's sermons, marketing materials and web content add to the authors' explanation of the ways in which Downtown Church's leadership attempts to construct a supposedly authentic urban identity. Drawing from this content analysis, the authors offer a thoughtful discussion of the church's public advertisements. By deconstructing the visual and written components of the church's posters, the authors illuminate the assumptions that shape the leadership's vision of the city—a place for consumption and entertainment. Still, the discussion of this content analysis is limited. Greater attention to—or, perhaps, further discussion of—the written and visual materials produced by the leaders would have added a layer of materiality to the narrative descriptions of their visions for outreach. Because physical appearance is central to Downtown Church's identity, visual data (e.g. photographs of the worship space, examples of advertisements) would augment the authors' analysis of the aesthetic dimensions of the church's desired identity.

The Urban Church Imagined will be of interest to scholars of race and religion from a wide range of disciplines. Although Barron and Williams approach Downtown Church as sociologists, their compelling narrative contains little social-scientific jargon. Undergraduates and experienced researchers alike will find this book an accessible and engaging invitation to explore the web of assumptions about race, class, gender and religion in the city that constitute the racialized urban imaginary of Downtown Church.