

**Casselberry, Judith. *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism*. Duke UP, 2017.**

Jody Caldwell, Drew University

1 In *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism*, Judith Casselberry, Associate Professor of African Studies at Bowdoin College, provides an ethnographic analysis of the ways in which women simultaneously support a gendered hierarchy and exercise their own power within an African-American Holiness-Pentecostal congregation. Although there have recently been a number of studies of African American Pentecostalism (see, for example, Peter Marina's *Getting the Holy Ghost: Urban Ethnography in a Brooklyn Pentecostal Tongue-Speaking Church* [2013] and William Turner's *United Holy Church of America: Study in Black Holiness Pentecostalism* [2006]), as well as multiple and powerful theological analyses of African-American women's experience (see, for instance, M. Shawn Copeland's *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* [2009]), Casselberry's anthropological work fills a gap in focusing on the experience of African-American women within a particular denomination, the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ (COOLJC).

2 COOLJC was founded in 1916 as a more conservative offshoot of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World by Robert and Carrie Lawson. Holding to oneness theology (God, the Holy Ghost and Jesus are one, rather than separate entities), the denomination accepts two baptisms, one by water and the other by the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. At the time of Casselberry's research, it counted 55,000 members in about 300 churches. Approximately three-quarters of the members are women. Casselberry performed two years of participant-observation, along with interviews, oral histories, and surveys at a Queens, NY, congregation, True Deliverance Church (TLC).

3 Following a history of the COOLJC and TLC, Casselberry examines the role of women in the congregation, looking at their contributions to the daily running of the church, as well as their active part in helping members and prospective members in prayer and conversion. Finally, she describes the ways in which the church uses women's bodies to differentiate members from the rest of society by insisting on strict dress codes and emphasizing women's seductive power.

4 Drawing on the work of sociologists Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and Patricia Hill Collins, ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell, and others, Casselberry centers her analysis of women's participation in TLC around the notions of emotional, intimate and aesthetic labor, demonstrating

the ways in which women's work supports the male-led hierarch, while creating avenues for the expression of women's spiritual authority. From the start of COOLJC, various women's auxiliaries provided horizontal networks, both within the denomination and the individual congregation. Opportunities for leadership are available through these organizations locally and nationally, which support the daily work of churches, organizing activities, running educational programs, and providing all types of practical assistance to individual members and at church events such as an annual Women's Day.

5 Women are also involved in the spiritual activities of TLC. As well as participating in services and prayer groups, they sing, they pray publicly, and they perform the intimate labor of "altar work," praying with seekers, exhorting them to acceptance of Jesus, sometimes for hours at a time. Although they cannot preach, they may occasionally "speak as a missionary" (63), particularly within women's groups. All members are expected to engage in daily personal prayer and in the multiple activities of the church, both during the week and on Sundays, when women may spend the entire day at church.

6 Aesthetic labor – modeling a modest appearance, providing music for services – is also performed by female members. Maintaining an appearance "according to the standards" (160) falls primarily upon the women. Although some accept and observe the rules – no sleeveless tops, no skirts at or above the knee, no pants, bare legs or open-toed shoes – others see it as a matter of male control, which can be resented (161). The church's formal male dominance is negotiated by the women of TLC: a senior member may subvert the pastor's orders (111), as long as she does not do so openly, women may protest and reject a message reminding them of "the standards," but not within the public service. A wry acceptance of male authority, which can be countered by informal authority in those spheres run by women, was observed by Casselberry. At the same time, a woman's power is understood to be rooted in her choice to lead a holy life that involves submission. That submission, however, is more nuanced than it appears. Casselberry calls on Patricia Hill Collin's analysis in asserting that gender relations within the church are complicated by the reality that the congregation is understood less as a nuclear family, with a single patriarch, and more as "kin-structured local networks" (108), in which multiple spheres of influence are present, and where women's authority can be quietly exercised. The subtlety of the resistance, and its public invisibility, is perhaps over-nuanced by Casselberry.

7 Casselberry's analysis of the women-centered/male-led TLC complicates the popular understanding of African-American Pentecostal women as accepting male dominance. The female members of TLC are far from mindlessly submissive: while supporting male leadership and accepting the limits placed on women within COOLJC, they create a horizontal network of empowerment. In *The Labor of Faith*, Casselberry has provided a deep and ethnographically sound case-study for black feminist sociology.