Judith Casselberry


While Judith Casselberry is an outsider to Black Apostolic Pentecostalism, the anthropologist and Africana studies scholar demonstrates the same attentive and caring labor she narrates and theorizes among women in the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith (or _COOLJC_) in her new study, _The Labor of Faith_. Set in a converted, storefront church in the New York borough of Queens, Casselberry’s ethnography traces the transnational and multi-generational women in a local _COOLJC_ affiliate church, True Deliverance Church of the Apostolic Faith.

Casselberry’s project distinguishes itself from a variety of studies on both Pentecostal women and/or black and African diasporic women by paying attention to conceptions of labor. There have been many studies on Pentecostal women both in the U.S. (Elaine Lawless, R. Marie Griffith), and globally (Diane Austin-Broos, John Burdick). Moreover, black Pentecostal women have started to receive more scholarly attention, after the pathbreaking, but Baptist-dominated scholarship of historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. The work of sociologist Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, and much later historian Anthea Butler, who both studied Pentecostal women in the predominantly black Church of God in Christ are valuable interlocutors for Casselberry.

But by paying attention to labor, Casselberry is able to shine light on practices that construct raced and gendered identities of the women in _COOLJC_, while eschewing theoretical concepts like “agency,” which often produce an all or nothing at all approach for women’s empowerment or autonomy. Moreover, labor enables Casselberry to articulate the deeply embodied and affective work women do to fashion themselves as saints. For Casselberry, labor is articulated in three distinct ways: emotional labor, intimate labor and aesthetic labor. Importantly, through concepts of labor, the hard work of the women is neither interpreted primarily as exploited by men, nor reduced to how these women are situated within the so-called secular world.

Casselberry writes, “This study is ... set apart from earlier works because my interest lies more in the circumstances of producing a holy Black female personhood within faith communities and less in the connection of the religious worlds of Black women to social, civic, and political activism.” (5) This approach is not “otherworldly,” however, as Casselberry immediately opens the book with a group of women doing deep cleaning at the home of one of their church sisters, a younger saint, who has just died of a brain tumor. The physical labor of sweeping, and mopping, cooking and sanitizing the home of this single mom,
who died and left two teenaged children, is matched with the months these women had been spent praying, crying, and doubting as they supported their friend who died of cancer.

It is perhaps in this opening chapter where Casselberry’s narrative is most poignant, where the women’s own accounts of anger, fear, frustration, doubt, sadness, thankfulness, resilience and ultimately trust in God and abiding love for each other and their dearly departed sister demonstrate the significance of the labor, which often goes understudied by the academy and underappreciated by the church. One sainted mother describes how she labored for her dying sister, and for herself. “I woke up at six o’clock that Tuesday morning ... and got on my knees and I prayed until after seven o’clock. I got up off my knees, and I was crying. God knows I was crying. [She slapped the table repeatedly] My heart bust open like a big ocean...” (37)

Casselberry’s analysis does not stop with a layered and patient narration of the formation of a “holy Black female personhood.” She also introduces the concept of “women-driven patriarchies,” (105) and the considerable labor expended by women in these constructs. “As they move between supporting and resisting patriarchal systems, self-identification as sanctified shapes, and is shaped by, the areas women deem oppressive or empowering in the church community, at home, and in the secular labor force.” (106) In Casselberry’s account, these women endure domestic violence, divorce, disease, job stagnation, and even marginalization among other church women, and isolation as ministers’ and pastors’ spouses in these women-driven patriarchies.

The tension between these two concepts—of personhood and patriarchy—is best expressed when the women articulate they want more for themselves because of their faith, more than the men in the faith proclaim they can have. Whether it is the wives of COOLJC founder, the late Bishop Robert Clarence Lawson, who when he married them (his first wife died, and he remarried), both gave up their ministerial standing in another Pentecostal denomination to support the leader as “church mother,” (62–63) or the woman, who was physically beaten by her backslidden husband, because she would not “submit” and stay home from church (116), or the woman who worked for an investment bank, but could not get a promotion, because she was honest (121), or the young lady whose voice was needed to set the atmosphere for worship, but simultaneously could be condemned for failing to wear stockings on a 90-degree night (160–161), these stories point toward a culture of dissemblance being broken. Dissemblance is a concept put forward by historian Darlene Clark Hine in her essay, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” where she argues that black women migrating to the Midwest from the deep south,