

BOOK REVIEW

The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism

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Perhaps what we are looking for is relation, relation as a mode of existence that white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, relation as a mode of existence that Western thought—theological, philosophical, historical, ethical—attempts to dispense with, to discard, to destroy as its foundational project. Perhaps relation is all that we *is* and all that we have and can be, and *more*. The *more* is the fact of relation as the grounds for existence otherwise, existence in the flesh, against the process of making individual citizens of subjects, for the proliferation of an ethnocentrism that has been scaled to the measure of the global. The *more* is the fact that something exceeds the bounds and enclosures of Western categories of and strategies for doctrinal, theological, and moral containments.

What I mean to say is that Judith Casselberry's *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism* made me think deeply, let me clarify some ideas I'd been working on and through but that lacked precision of language to express. Everyone should read this text, one that takes seriously my heart and my joy, the practices of Blackpentecostal women, their making worlds otherwise than the normative. It is clear that Casselberry practiced relation with the women from True Deliverance Church whom she discusses, and it is clear because they practiced relation with *her*, they practiced an openness and vulnerability and joy and sorrow with her.

There is so much care in the text because, it seems to me at least, the work was a different kind of labor, not contained by the strategies and categories of academic rigor and intellection but that could only have emerged from practicing witness, practicing abiding with others, as the *grounds* from which life happens. This is care work, this is the labor of care as faith that does not belong to, that is not the private property of, religiosity and doctrines and creeds. What Casselberry discovered is that the possibility for relation exists and persists even against doctrinal and theological difference and dissidence, that there is something that exceeds the enclosures of these categories. Categories of difference only interdict the flourishing of relation and the possibility of sociality. Casselberry discovered this with these black apostolic women.

She found it in Sister Louise Franklin's house: how Casselberry arrived at her home, exchanged hugs and greetings of "Praise Him"; how Mother Morris handed the broom to Casselberry to sweep the stairs and carpets; how Mother Reeves sang "Thank you,

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Lord” to provide sonic comfort and warmth; how sound provides a space of reprieve and release, allowing voice to move through the house and be invitational. It’s all about labor.

Whether they were teaching Sunday school, teaching Bible class, ushering, heading an auxiliary, sponsoring services, organizing prayer breakfasts, producing religious tracts, setting up after-school programs, embroidering communion linen, running the kitchen, singing with or directing a choir, playing instruments, preparing gift baskets, taking up the offering, raising funds, praying for souls at the altar, or ministering to the sick, imprisoned, or homeless, work should be done “heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.” (2)

There would be no black church as an idea and institution if there were no labor to let it happen, if there were no labor that produced the food, the cleaning, the organizational structure. It is not just invisibilized labor, but a kind of work that is not considered to be labor or laborious at all because it is gendered. Gender is a process and functions to make possible a foundational claim for something to be considered labor and laborious [and move away from or renounce relation to it.] Gender as a process of renunciation functions precisely by occluding the possibility for relation. The possibility of acceding to or renouncing relation enunciates the epistemological horizon, its thrust, measure, and frame.

What we find in Casselberry, then, is a critique of epistemologies that make it possible for some labor to not be labor because the category of gender pertains such that, like black, *labor is, labor ain’t...* and it’s the relay between the is and ain’t, between that which is materially practiced and that which is produced *for and in and with and about thought and cognition as the renunciation of the flesh and the renouncing of material practice*, that makes possible the practice of exploitation. It is a space, a gap, in which the reverberation might also become the occasion for disrupting and breaking with that very epistemological constitution. The critique of this practice of renunciation exists as the practice of relation the women illustrate.

Casselberry discusses “the church work of Black women as an occupation” because she is right to underscore the ways that considering it labor might enable us to understand the complexity of an epistemology and political economy that is in deep relation to the structure of racial capitalism, wage theft, and labor exploitation but also exceeds the analytical presumptions of that epistemological and political economic thrust (6).

Reading the text, I’m reminded of my mother. Got saved at 14, stopped wearing pants that day. Sings in the choir, the praise team. Preachers and teaches. Cooks and cleans. Is the first one called when someone dies. Creates programs for funerals. Calls the family. Orders flowers. Opens her home so saints can visit and feel comforted. Visits loved ones and family friends and people in hospitals. Takes care of children, gives them toys for holidays, sends cards to let people know they are thought about. This is the practice of relation.

There is so much labor, so much that is done for the life of the church, but that is not considered to be labor at all. It’s just what the pastor’s wife is supposed to do. It’s just what the church mother is supposed to do. They do these things because they are in relation with one another, they do these things because of love, not only or even primarily because of what some might consider to be a colonized mind and imagination.

We can’t consider this labor only or even primarily the function of colonized minds and imaginations because the women Casselberry discusses are women she is in *relation*

with and to. They opened themselves up, in other words, made themselves vulnerable to *her*, practiced the cheerfulness and delight of dense and abiding friendship even as Casselberry reminds readers that she is not a saint. She does not fit within the strictures of what the presumed identity of a saint would include. Yet they share relation. They ground in the *more*.

What does it even mean to make a declaration of identity, of being or not being a saint, when relation is not only possible but happens and is sustained and cultivated and tended to in difference?

This practice of difference is both internal to the world of True Deliverance Church members but also for those both of and not of that world. I detected this openness to difference when Casselberry described the various theological responses to the death of Sister Franklin. Why didn't God heal her when she declared that she would be healed? Sister Franklin said "God is Good. He's a healer," *and* "You know it's a lot, it's a whole lot." And the responses to her death beyond the possibility of her healing were varied. Did she die because of God's will? Or her will? Or her weakness of faith? Or some other unthought possibility?

What the women's various responses to her death illustrate is that community is not constituted by agreement or even conclusive statements but by contingency. Doctrine and theology—for example, the doctrinal belief in divine healing according to Acts and Matthew—are organizing principles, *not necessarily* settled ideas. But the women remain in relation, they remain in community, through disagreement.

And it's because of and about relation to renunciation.

I return to this word, this concept—renunciation—because Casselberry's text lets me really sense something with force. These women practice labor that is neither about enjoyment and pleasure nor about aversion and abjection. They practice relation, and the various operations of church life both in and outside the church building are what make relation possible.

I have been writing about white supremacy as the renunciation of the flesh, how white supremacy is the practice of renunciation of relation, of the social, of blackness. What became clear to me reading Casselberry's text is how the desire to produce a normative function and form—whether in the guise of patriarchy as a system of domination, religious chauvinism, normative gender and sexuality as a mode of queer antagonism, settler colonialism, antiblack racism—that dispenses with difference is the practice of renunciation; it is the renouncing of the possibility for and of and about relation.

These women are not laboring as a fact of gender that precedes as some sort of ontological condition, one that constructs certain bodies as having a natural disposition for and toward the three categories of labor—emotional, intimate, aesthetic—that Casselberry elaborates for readers. Rather, they are laboring as a fact of refusing to renounce relation, refusing renunciation of the social, as the grounds from which life is made and happens. Theirs is the practice of openness and vulnerability, blackness the fact of encounter with livingness and refusing to renounce relation to fragility and contingency.

It is, in a word, the posture and practice of *yes*. And I think that's one reason the saints in Blackpentecostal churches sing the "Yes, Lord" chant: it enunciates and announces this kind of posture. Their labor of faith is the refusal to relinquish relation even when relation is that which is targeted for amelioration and annihilation. It's not that men in these churches cannot or don't have the ability to do this kind of emotional, intimate, and aesthetic labor. It's that the system of domination called patriarchy,

heterosexism, and queer antagonism has produced the occasion for them to practice renunciation of the social field in which this kind of labor is produced. It becomes gendered labor at the point of renouncing the labor as labor, renouncing the work as work.

This is all true.

But emotional, intimate, and aesthetic labor became really clear to me in Casselberry's discussion of Sister Louise Franklin's death. It reminded me of the care work my mother did for her aunt, who lived with schizophrenia. My mother would visit her aunt and I would travel with her to the mental health facility in which her aunt lived out her final days. She would visit for a couple of hours, and I mostly remember us just sitting there, being in her aunt's presence. Before she lived in the facility, by mistake she had burned down the house in which she was living; my mother went to her aunt and brought her to our house. She took care of her aunt, gave her clothes, food, bathed her.

My mother had to learn, according to a conversation I had with her, about how to get assistance for people living with mental illness, she had to learn who to call to get help with housing and transfer of rights and possessions. She had to learn technical things about the state of New Jersey, but she also had to work daily at her job and continued to do work at the church and *also* took care, still, of my brother and me. This is deeply intimate and emotional and aesthetic *care* and labor. And when her aunt passed away, my mother arranged the funeral. She did these things alone, without assistance.

This is the kind of labor Casselberry describes in her text. From her book, readers learn that few if any of the church men participate in any of this labor, and when they do, they do not do it in an ongoing and sustained way.

So when the men relinquish laborious labor, hard work, and physical jobs, they also refuse relation to and renounce the capacity for intimacy that the work makes possible; they renounce labor *and the sociality that is had and gained and practiced through that labor*. They give up, they cede, they relinquish the capacity for being in relation in a way that is deeply emotional, intimate, and physical. They give up friendship as a way of life, forestalling it. They give up intimacy as a way of lovingness and livingness, refusing its capacity for radically altering who they could be.

Casselberry demonstrates this with clarity. The labor of faith is one that one can share in or renounce relation to. But in such renunciation, one also relinquishes the sociality that is established and maintained.

The question is how can we value and find delight in the sociality that is produced by refusing to renounce relation to these forms of practice while also attending to the exploitation and the violence that attends what Casselberry describes as “[t]he male-headed hierarchy [that] depends on the female majority’s spiritual-organizational acumen and labor for its very existence” (105). This would mean that we should not denounce or dispense with the emotional, intimate, and aesthetic labor but ask how we can all share in it as a practice of delight and joy and pleasure in the service of a more just and livable community.

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