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# Managed Diversity: Race, Place, and an Urban Church

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*This study examines the organizational practices and experiences of congregational diversity in an evangelical urban church. Based on data collected using ethnographic methods over an 18-month period, this study suggests a principal organizational practice (managed diversity) employed by white church leaders produces complex and consequential outcomes for the racial experiences of congregation members. Specifically, the management of diversity results in three techniques integral to organizational outcomes that reveal the mechanisms by which race is conceptualized and manipulated to navigate new religious markets. This study contributes to ongoing scholarship about the conceptual apparatus that voluntary organizations engage to foster racial diversity.*

*Key words:* multiracial congregations; diversity; urban.

In 2008, the *Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion* reported an increase in evangelical congregations located in downtown metropolitan areas. These changing spatial patterns raise the question of how the racial experiences of members might differ in a more diverse context. Religious congregations are among the most common public gatherings in American society, yet, like many organizations in this country, they struggle to racially integrate themselves (DeYoung et al. 2003). How might a novel racial context affect organizations that have historically been (and in many cases remain) racially segregated?

It is important to understand the role of social contexts in racially diverse settings, given the increase in such congregations, as well as the growing presence of multiracial evangelical congregations in the United States (Cobb et al. 2015; Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Dougherty and Mulder 2009; Wadsworth 2014). Moreover, in light of ongoing claims that evangelical leaders are adopting progressive stances on race and other social issues (DeYoung et al. 2003), this study provides insight into the evolving role of religious organizations in

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addressing social problems in the United States and abroad. As such, the racial dynamics of U.S. urban spaces, coupled with the push for racial diversity among evangelical churches, render urban, downtown congregations a prime area for empirical and theoretical exploration.

This study examines how congregants and church leaders shape the cultural meanings of diversity within a specific context and how these meanings, in turn, shape evangelicals' understanding of and experiences with churches in downtown areas.

## DIVERSITY, CHURCH, AND THE CITY

It is not new to the study of religion to emphasize the mechanisms by which religious organizations create culturally mixed and integrated communities (Ammerman 1997; Chaves and Higgins 1992; Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Garces-Foley 2007; Lichterman et al. 2009; Marti and Emerson 2014; Warner 1996; Warner and Wittner 1998). Chicago is a particularly interesting place for investigating these dynamics. Molotch's (1972) classic study of the interplay among Chicago's racial climate, voluntary organizations, and race relations suggested white religious leaders were key in creating and maintaining racial boundaries within and outside Chicago's congregations. Specifically, Molotch (1972:188) found religious leaders in racially diverse congregations would intentionally segregate black and white members in order to ensure that "whatever integration existed in church organizations existed primarily in terms of worship activity, and not in terms of church parareligious social life." In the new era of multicultural politics (Berrey 2005; Collins 1997, 2011) and the widespread consumption of race-based authenticity (Grazian 2004) in U.S. cities, new social realities are bound to present themselves to congregations organizing there.

While the dynamics of religion, race, and the city have received substantial research attention in recent years (McRoberts 2003; Pattillo-McCoy 1998, 1999), much of this work examined urban religion from the vantage point of African American religious life using a "religious district" rather than a single congregation as the unit of analysis. Similarly, Dougherty and Mulder (2009) accounted for the process by which established urban congregations acquire a racially diverse membership base through neighborhood change. In contrast, Marti's (2005) well-cited study of race relations in a multiethnic evangelical congregation in Los Angeles argued that leaders in this congregation carried out the church's goals by supervising diverse, creative, and engaging activities that continued to draw people into its organizational sphere. Yet Marti's study emphasized mechanisms other than the greater structural issues of race and racism embedded in the urban context of this city.

Much of the previous work drew on Allport's (1954) contact theory, which argued that isolation from dissimilar racial/ethnic groups may breed racial resentment because majority racial groups are deprived of the opportunity to challenge their beliefs about dissimilar groups. Intergroup contact, in the right setting, is one factor that can reduce racial divisions in the United States. Though prior

research has shown that religious leaders are crucial in shaping race relations within congregations, considerably less is known about how racialized contexts may influence their views on race relations, or how this influence may aid in the formation of race relations within a congregation. This neglect is curious given ongoing claims by race relations theorists that the meaning of race relations and understanding of social problems tend to be situated within a larger social context (Bonilla-Silva 2006; McRoberts 2003; Omi and Winant 1994; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). This neglect also occurs despite ongoing evidence that religious congregations purposefully use "the city" as a basis for establishing themselves and attracting members, congregations that also exist within—and in part react to—the deeply racialized character of American society and culture (Massey and Denton 1993; Omi and Winant 1994).

The present study contributes to the literature on race relations in a multiracial congregation by examining the interplay between social contexts and race relations in a metropolitan area—Chicago. Specific attention is paid to an organizational practice, *managed diversity,* to illuminate the role of racialized social contexts as a motivating factor in the types of interracial interactions experienced within an evangelical congregation in downtown Chicago. Specifically, managed diversity reflects a series of techniques officials engage in: (1) to appropriate elements of urban blackness, (2) to strategically manage the visibility of black volunteers, and (3) to carefully avoid racialized texts and religious practices within their congregation. The management of diversity legitimizes the congregation as not "too white" but rather a racially diverse and authentically urban establishment appropriate for a young urban demographic.

## DATA AND METHODS

Downtown Church is an evangelical church with a congregation of approximately 200 members at the time of the study. Downtown Church opened its doors in 2007, when the head pastor, Phil and his wife, Emily, were 26 years old. Although the pastor and his staff are white and reside in the nearby Indiana suburbs, their mission is to target nonaffiliated Chicago churchgoers and provide them with a spiritual atmosphere that is "challenging, relevant, and never boring."[1] Both pastors and congregants describe their church as "diverse." Interviews with the pastoral staff[2] show Downtown Church is 75 percent white. Asian

[1]Excerpt from church bulletin.

[2]As a result of its infancy, the church's congregation went through periods where they were over 80 percent white, which presented some challenges in collecting demographic data. All pastors interviewed for this study were asked to provide data on the racial profile of the church and their responses were averaged. This approach is not uncommon when collecting demographic data on congregations. The numbers presented are approximate estimates and include international members. Many international congregants were students only visiting for three to six months, and most were from Europe, South America, and Australia.

(8 percent) and Latino/a members (7 percent) are the largest minority groups while African American (6 percent) and multiracial (4 percent) members represent the smallest minority groups. The pastoral staff reports the average congregant age is 25 years old.

Downtown Church meets only on Sunday evenings in a performing arts theater in the greater downtown area of Chicago. The theater is mere blocks away from the city's upscale restaurants, lounges, and bars and only a few miles from the city's downtown core, the Loop. Between the West and South Loop, the church is surrounded by racially diverse neighborhoods where middle-class consumers enjoy urban amenities such as factories converted into condos and innovative ethnic fusion restaurants. The destruction of nearby low-income housing also put gentrified black neighborhoods in close proximity (Pattillo-McCoy 1999, 2007). Leaders and congregants of Downtown Church envision their congregation as a space for the entire city of Chicago, not simply part of it. Their boundaries become fluid, creating contested expectations of belonging.

Downtown Church is intended to emulate a "non-church" atmosphere and create an alternative space to appeal to upwardly mobile young adults, a group currently unrepresented within the evangelical church (Flory and Miller 2008). Congregants enjoy high-energy worship services flooded with high-tech media as well as unorthodox sermons related to the latest trends in social media, hip-hop music, and pop culture. However, the order of service, music style, and music selection are in keeping with traditionally white evangelical congregations.

Downtown Church is a "planted" congregation, an outreach effort by a mega-church that exists well outside the metropolitan area it is targeting. Downtown Church receives financial support from its suburban headquarters, and the paid leadership staff are all former members of a mega-church, but they have free rein to create their own church separate from the traditional model. Downtown Church is considered nondenominational evangelical Protestant, and echoes the deep history of innovative evangelical efforts to confront and convert worldly society. At the core of its identity are the intersection of urban nightlife, middle-class utilization of city spaces, and the visibility of racial and ethnic minorities. This study focuses on the latter and uses the term "urban churches" to designate those located in city centers.

The data presented in this paper come from a larger ethnographic research project undertaken from November 2008 to May 2010. It included participant observation during and collection of field notes on evening worship services, volunteer leadership meetings, pastoral meetings, and other church-related activities such as dinners, casual social events, and community-building endeavors. For the purpose of this study, data from worship services and leadership meetings are presented alongside interview reports. This study encompassed 35 ethnographic interviews and 20 semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic interviews—sometimes referred to as unstructured interviews (Bell 1995)—are

especially useful to gain trust within the population under study (Brown-Saracino et al. 2008; Burawoy 1998). The ethnographic interviews in this study ranged from 15 minutes to 2 hours and involved men and women between ages 19 and 47.[3] Participants in the semi-structured interviews were obtained via a convenience sample one year into the study. Interviews with a group of core informants led to recommendations of interviewees 18 years of age and over who had attended the church consistently for at least three months. Interviews occurred and were recorded in offices, coffee shops, restaurants, and in some cases, participants' homes. Interviewees ranged in church involvement from members to volunteer leaders. The volunteer staff comprised congregants who assisted, free of charge, with tasks such as setting up for services or organizing women's ministry events. Pseudonyms are used for the church, its participants, and all places within this study.

Organizations such as congregations play a critical role in the creation and reproduction of racial categories, racialized practices, and ideologies (Edwards 2008; Marti 2012), although the role of congregations remains underdeveloped in scholarship outside religious studies (Edwards et al. 2013). The case of urban multiracial congregations merits the refinement of theoretical constructs for analyzing race by incorporating religious settings. Moreover, such refinement is necessary to understand diversity in the contemporary period of racial inclusion, especially when race is a central concern of identity politics for one of the most pervasive organizations in the United States. Below, three techniques that represent managed diversity are discussed in detail.

## MANAGED DIVERSITY: TECHNIQUES TO INCLUSION

> *No, those other churches out there aren't like us. We are really a church for the city. Other churches can be real vanilla, but that's not us. I mean, look around. We have people from everywhere, all over Europe, Latin America, black guys, white guys. Other places are just white, just plain ol' white.*
>
> —*Assistant Pastor Craig*

### *Locating Blackness and the Urban Cool*

Pastors responsible for the development of Downtown Church reside in predominantly white neighborhoods in suburban and exurban Indiana. The geographic, cultural, and racial differences between the church leadership and Chicago residents provide insight into the complexities involved in creating a consumable space for their target population. Downtown Church leaders are adamant that they do not want recognition as a "black church." As Assistant Pastor Craig explained:

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[3]It was not uncommon for one person to provide multiple interviews during the study. However, no participant gave more than two ethnographic interviews.

> *We don't want to be a black church. There are already churches like that so we have to be careful about how we set up our church so it doesn't go that way. We want to keep the "downtown" vibe.*

The pastoral staff expressed some concern that their urban location and the presence of African Americans in the congregation will misrepresent them as an "inner-city" church rather than a "downtown" one. This statement is perplexing as the church remains easily accessible to racially diverse middle-class groups. The threat of proximity to the "inner city" is physically unfounded. In a sense, these boundaries are more or less ambiguous but contribute to a larger conception of the city as tightly connected to the black population. Assistant Pastor Craig went on to explain his distinction between "downtown" and "inner-city":

> *We are more like a city church, you know, located in the downtown area where everything is going on. We are not an inner-city church, no way. Those churches serve people with different needs than our congregation. We are more of a downtown church, right in the center of downtown life.*

When asked to elaborate on the differences between inner-city and downtown churches in Chicago, Assistant Pastor Craig provided the names of predominantly black congregations in distressed neighborhoods on the South Side. His distinction between the two terms is a racialized class distinction influenced by the historic economic disadvantage of black Americans in urban cities (Massey and Denton 1993).

Consequently, for leaders of Downtown Church, their success in the urban religious market depends heavily on their ability to attract the consumer class through the commodification of urban blackness and their access to a black membership base (Grazian 2004; Hooks 1993; Johnson 2003). In the same way, many of the racial politics within Downtown Church are influenced by the negotiation and appropriation of blackness on the part of church leaders and, often, complicity by congregants. During weekly services, it is not uncommon for Pastor Phil to reference famous black rap moguls and celebrities or issues in the hip-hop world that he assumes are connected to the urban scene. During a sermon one Sunday, Pastor Phil opened the service by holding up his iPhone and asking:

> *Do you guys follow Diddy (black rap mogul) on Twitter? He has really inspirational things to say. He grew up in a city not too different than Chicago. The man is so cool, if I could only be as cool as him. Everyone should follow Diddy. He's such a huge success.*

Pastor Phil also attempted to facilitate a call-and-response component to his sermonizing—a staple in traditionally black congregations (Lichterman et al. 2009; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). He gave instructions to the largely white membership, complete with the appropriate "response," often a concoction of hip-hop slang and traditional black preaching styles awkwardly rolled into one: "Can I get

some help with the word? It's ok if you say 'preach, preacher' or 'holla at ya, boy' to let me know you are feelin' what I am sayin'."

Diversity from the vantage point of the white consumer motivates the pastoral staff to participate in the appropriation of black entertainment and religious culture as a means to provide their target demographic with an "authentic" urban church experience. However, their efforts fall flat for some members who reside in the city rather than consume it. Erica, a black member, reported:

> *I just don't like it when he [Pastor Phil] does that . . . you know, tries to talk black one week, then act like he knows what's up the next. It's like he is trying so hard 'cause we're in the city.*

Erica believes that due to their location, church leaders end up producing "the city" as an object expressed and embodied, in part, by African Americans. Pastor Phil co-opts certain elements of black church culture or celebrity he deems advantageous in appealing to his urban audience. Affirmation of their expectations manifests in the ways members describe the congregation. When asked, congregants unequivocally pointed to the "diversity" of the membership as a defining feature. Inevitably, their descriptions gave primacy to the presence of the African American members (Berrey 2005). As Joshua, a white member, put it, "I would describe us as diverse. When I first got here, Larry (black member) and Travis (black member) greeted me, and we have been cool ever since. There is so much diversity here." Or, as Rachel, a Latina member, noted:

> *The church has a real multicultural vibe. We have women from Brazil and international students who come in and out, and then, I mean, look around, we have Brian and Melanie on stage (black singers), Monty and Nathan (black greeters) greeting you. Diversity is all around.*

Bell and Hartmann (2007) stated that when Americans discuss diversity race is at the core of diversity talk, and implicit racial knowledge is almost always assumed. Accordingly, for Downtown Church congregants, diversity hinges on the visible presence of African Americans. When asked to describe the church's diversity, respondents mentioned a black member. Ironically, the black membership base is one of the smallest populations at Downtown Church. This implicitly creates a hierarchy within this conceptualization of diversity. The heightened focus on the black body renders other groups a distant second.

### *Black Male Visibility*

While African Americans are one of the smallest groups at Downtown Church, the majority of individuals in visible volunteer positions (greeters, ushers, musicians, and singers) are African American. Week after week during this study, black men were often asked to serve in greeter positions, but white men were rarely asked to do so. Members of the black male greeter staff initially said they had no intention of getting involved, but the pastor said they had a "great look" and represented the church well. Although this coaxing persuaded some of the men to

join, others remained skeptical. Before an evening church service, one of the members scanned the lobby and said:

> *It's like you walk in and see all of these brothas, and you're like . . . whoa . . . wait a minute . . . what are they [Downtown Church] trying to do? They got Travis [a black greeter] out there in the front, then they got my man Rich [another black greeter] over there working the table. It's like they are really trying to say something . . . like yea, we're in the city, we got some niggas.*
>
> —*Larry, black member*

Larry, a personal trainer and Chicago native, came to Downtown Church to help start a church for "his city" and to grow his business. He met the pastor and his wife at the gym when they were in town on a visit. When they told Larry about their plans, Pastor Phil and Emily personally invited Larry to get involved. Larry became acutely aware of the utility of the church's black volunteer staff as time passed. He acknowledged the interpretation of the urban context as a racialized and gendered space. Larry assumed black men conferred the legitimacy of the church in a diverse, urban city (Berrey 2005; Grazian 2004).

Downtown Church leaders are very particular about the people they select to greet and represent the congregation. For instance, male black greeters are typically tall, physically fit, and possess or enact performances of tastes, speech, and dress to coincide with the upwardly mobile young adults the church attempts to attract. All the while, these men assert a type of urban masculinity in their physical appearance and deep skin tones that is alluring but contained—safe enough to consume in this urban setting (Child 2009; Grazian 2004; Hooks 1993; Johnson 2003; Russell-Brown 2008).

After one leadership meeting, Pastor Phil stopped Travis [black greeter] at the door and said, "When Travis started standing out front for us . . . we started getting a lot more strong black women to come here and get involved . . . and men like him too. He has been a nice addition." Pastor Phil made this statement with a large smile as he patted Travis on the back then walked down the hall. Travis offered a smirk, shook his head, and left in the opposite direction. In this instance, Pastor Phil allowed a glimpse into the "backstage" production of visible, conspicuous diversity within the church (Goffman 1959; Marti and Emerson 2014).

Travis was one of four black men continuously used as greet staff. Each of these men is attractive (one a Calvin Klein model, another a personal trainer) and typically involved in the city's nightlife scene (two were well-known DJs and club promoters) or well educated and well networked in the community. These men are not representative of African American men in Chicago; rather, they represent a version of urban blackness that reinforces the corporate "downtown" identity church leaders hope to cultivate.

### *Selective Rituals*

The leadership of Downtown Church is overwhelmingly white, and the dominant organizational style comes out of the white Protestant evangelical tradition

(Ammerman 2005). It is from this vantage point that rituals and styles of worship emerge. Over the course of this study, not one sermon, distribution of religious materials, staff, or board meeting was dedicated to racial reconciliation, multiculturalism, or integration. There is no racial diversity in the music selection (e.g., songs in Spanish or gospel music) or programming events offered by the church. In an interview, one associate pastor began to discuss his thoughts on racially inclusive rituals. Paul focuses on the music selections during the Sunday service.

> *You have to make sure the culture isn't shifting one way or the other . . . so a lot of times we get pounded by some of the team some of the . . . I don't know what the right terms are . . . some of the black people on our team . . . pounded . . . why don't you do more gospel music . . . well a lot of things we do already appeal to the African American culture, and if we did gospel too it would create a shift that might . . . 'cause you know a lot of white people like the music and a lot of black people like this . . . 'cause a lot of people would argue, why wouldn't it go that way, those are the people who want to come . . . 'cause diversity is a part of our core values, and in order to be truly diverse you have to manage it.*

Although Paul struggled with the correct terms for the black membership base, he expressed a clear understanding of the potential for a larger black presence in the congregation. For Paul, an uncontrolled amount of "diversity"—namely, the presence of more black individuals—would cause the infrastructure to change. In order to be truly diverse, Paul indicated, they must manage the visibility of black volunteers, the number of black members they attract, and the quantity of inclusive religious practices offered. In this instance, racially diverse organizations can still reproduce systems of exclusion without comprehending they are in concert with larger systems of racial oppression and exclusion (Marti and Emerson 2014).

Pastor Phil allows the worship team to play only selections and arrangements from Hillsong, a contemporary Christian group comprising mostly white musicians from Australia and Western Europe. He has been confronted on many occasions through e-mail or in person regarding the lack of diversity in the song selection. Yet in meetings with worship team leaders, Pastor Phil boasted, "Everyone loves Hillsong. They are the best." His firm stance on Hillsong offered no recognition of the cultural origins of the music and the racial identifications connected to those origins. These racialized beliefs about worship and ritual are part of the ongoing structure of his congregation. As such, managing diversity is a slippery slope, illustrating how pastors and congregants construct the meaning of racial diversity and interpret organizational practices.

The following section reveals how managed diversity unearths competing assumptions of congregational diversity and ultimately shapes the racial experiences of congregants. Managed diversity masks color-blind racism through the reproduction of hierarchies, ultimately impacting the sustainability of Downtown Church's most coveted population.

## THE DILEMMAS OF MANAGED DIVERSITY

### *Diversity: A Competitive Edge*

The vast majority of evangelical congregations remain racially segregated yet claim or attempt to pursue racial diversity (Emerson and Woo 2006). Evangelical congregations struggle in varying degrees with this discrepancy, but most are keenly aware of the issue. Therefore, the presence of select minority bodies in Downtown Church offers the congregation a competitive edge over neighboring, predominantly white churches that have failed in their pursuit of racial diversity. As Chad, a white member, pointed out, "Have you visited those other churches around here, you know like Central? They are so boring . . . they are basically all white, not for me. They're not like us." But as James, a black member, noted:

> *I think that ties into the presentation of the church where aside from the leadership only being white, those who are under the leadership or are in main key roles have to look a certain way as well . . . definitely stylistically . . . ethnically that is where they provide their leeway to seem diverse.*

A scant number of nonwhite bodies appeals to and aligns with the expectation of racial diversity in the city. Churches in urban spaces face an open market in terms of attracting members (Martinez and Dougherty 2013; McRoberts 2003), so all congregational actions must be regarded in that light.

While African American members serve as an organizational staple, they are also penalized for being black and in the city. In an interview, Associate Pastor Paul conveyed that the leadership team was cautious about any of the volunteer teams appearing "too black." He said the pastors would even remove black volunteers from their leadership positions and place them in other positions with less of a black presence. When asked for an example, he immediately replied, "In our children's ministry, we had a conversation like, why are all of the teachers black and you're [team leader] the only white person?" He went on to say this conversation with the team leader resulted in the relocation of two black members to other volunteer teams. These adjustments were made regardless of ministry preference or the experience level of the black volunteers. Church leaders were not concerned with the children's ministry appearing "too white" or overrepresented by any other racial group.

### *Muted Power and Segmented Inclusion*

Importantly, some of the black men who volunteer reported interest in leadership within the church, but their current volunteer positions were not what they had in mind. Larry said, "It's like Michigan Avenue . . . you [black men] can buy but you can't own. It's the same thing here at Downtown Church." Larry acknowledged the church is a mirror image of the dominant culture, in which society resists integrating black men into positions of power, influence, or leadership (Collins 1997; Royster 2003) even if they are celebrated in other ways or for their talents.

At Downtown Church, nonblack volunteers are often propelled into volunteer or leadership positions of influence and authority. Some volunteers in higher-tier positions described their journey to the top as an expedited one:

> *I was really nervous . . . well I am still really nervous that someone is going to come up to me and ask me something and I won't know the answer. I don't even know the books [of the Bible]. Can you believe it? I haven't even been to a Christian church before this one. But about a month after I started coming, Phil asked if I wanted to help, and so I help to co-run the children's ministry.*
>
> —*Vanessa, Latina volunteer*

Similarly, a member witnessed a comparable experience for another volunteer:

> *You know, girl, it's crazy. I see people like Chad [white man in charge of the worship band] and I think, "Wow, he just got here, and he is already running the show." It's like they just threw him in there so fast. I don't really think he is ready, and he seems overwhelmed, but they really like him. He hasn't even been here that long.*
>
> —*Leslie, black vocalist*

Unlike other racial groups, black men participate in church activities but are not elevated into upper-tier positions. In her study of multiracial congregations, Edwards (2008) found a congregation was open to hiring a black pastor as long as that did not have any major impact on the church or worship styles. Once black identity becomes too prevalent, the idea of having a black person in more prominent positions becomes less attractive to white (and sometimes nonwhite) parishioners.

After one evening service, Melanie, a vocalist on the worship team, began to take down some of the sound equipment. She started to discuss her disappointment with the music selections:

> *I mean, we are in Chicago. There are so many types of people here . . . (whispering) . . . I keep asking the pastor about changing up the music to represent all of the people here, but I get nothing. I have asked three times, and he doesn't change anything. Why not be proud of what you have and represent the people here? Why can't we have a little salsa, Latin, gospel . . . something?*

For many multiracial congregations or those attempting integration, music selection is a significant factor in the success or failure of their endeavors (Ammerman 1997; Becker 1999). Members view an integration of culturally distinct rituals and worship practices as a sign of respect and inclusion for nonwhite members in these traditionally white spaces (Dougherty and Huyser 2008).

An interview with Chad revealed he had never led a worship team prior to coming to this church. The music set is one of the most important components of an evangelical service (Chaves 2004; Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Marti 2012). Styles of worship and song selection communicate not only a particular religious and organizational identity but a racial one as well (for extended discussion, see Marti 2012). Chad, knowing the importance of the music, expressed

reservations about starting his role so quickly. He even said that at times he would like to share the responsibility with a more experienced member. However, the pastoral staff encouraged Chad to take this position and assured him that they would be there to guide his music selection.

### *Seasonal Diversity*

Diversity, as a consumable feature of an urban religious experience, is not always sustainable. As an organization where racial diversity is treated primarily by the leadership as either a marketing tool or a symbolic gesture, it is not uncommon for Downtown Church to experience stretches of time where racial diversity is nearly nonexistent. For the most part, there is a minority presence in the church, but a few times a year, the attending congregation is nearly all white. Antoinette, one of the few black women in leadership, noted:

> *For a while we had the "black corner" where Larry, Monty, Crystal, and some of the others would hang out. But after a while, most of them stopped coming. It will go in waves. Sometimes we have a lot of people of color and we are really bumpin', and then it just falls off.*

Antoinette attributed these "seasons" to the "freshness" and "excitement" that Downtown Church emits to people who are from more traditional, monoracial churches. But after a while, she claimed, "They get frustrated with the lack of inclusion in our services, and they leave."

The church's paradoxical way of approaching diversity results in these *diversity droughts*. The pastoral staff always secured a few black volunteer leaders to continue serving during these periods. There were no explicit discussions in leadership meetings about recouping the lost black population. Instead, pastors encouraged members to invite friends—all the while continuing their appropriation schemes. When asked why these diversity droughts might occur, the pastoral staff and some members attributed the changes to the growing pains of a newly forming church or to the busy lives of young people living in the city. After one such episode, Sonja, a black member and former volunteer, gave an interview:

> *I would have to say right now . . . (long pause) . . . we don't have that many right now [from] the African American community . . . ummm . . . because we have not established that multicultural feel so much yet-like in our music and things of that nature . . . worship and the music here is pretty Caucasian-y. People who are used to different groups and different styles will probably go through a culture shock, and I know many that feel disconnected.*

Sonja explained the lack of diversity in religious rituals prevents black members from fully connecting to the church (Dougherty and Huyser 2008). For Sonja, a "multicultural vibe" means a place where African American religious traditions are embraced. Whether due to the leadership's lack of understanding regarding certain racial matters or just the challenge of learning a new turf, either explanation was often not made explicit.

Conversely, interviews revealed both white and nonwhite members were relieved by the lack of "race-talk" at the beginning of their tenure with the congregation. Members described the church as a "race-less" space where racial diversity is not the main focal point (Berrey 2005). Natalia, a biracial member, explained:

> *It was really cool when I walked in, all different kinds of people, and race was never mentioned, which was a breath of fresh air. But now it's just strange that nothing is ever said about it. Usually churches would jump at the chance to talk about it.*

Natalia assumed that Downtown Church was an equally inclusive space congruent with contemporary organizational diversity paradigms. Over time, however, Natalia—who once supported a "race-less" space—began to view the congregation as an untapped opportunity to cultivate a multiracial religioculture. Just as Natalia's disenchantment grew, others also shared a more skeptical view. Linda, a white volunteer leader, lamented, "Diversity is just a token value here. It is something that the pastor uses to one-up the other churches in the area. That's all it is."

Within the walls of Downtown Church, racial diversity and inclusion take a color-blind or color-invisible approach in which all members are "individuals" rather than recognize how race is a central feature of everyday life. Diversity can be praised, even highlighted, and is regarded as the natural and welcome outcome of urban life. But it simultaneously shuts down serious attempts at discussing race or racial advantage/disparities and removes the need to be intentional about correcting past and present injustices. The color-blind approach can leave minority members disenfranchised, offended, ignored, and without the cultural resources to address that situation.

## DISCUSSION

In their eager attempts to penetrate the urban church market, Downtown Church leaders and congregants wade through varied expectations of organizational diversity influenced by their interpretation of the racial structure within the urban scene. This study suggests the organizational practice of managed diversity employed by white church leaders produces complex and consequential outcomes for racial experiences within the congregation. Specifically, it produces three racial outcomes.

First, the relationship between race and place in conjunction with the need to establish an urban identity drives congregations such as Downtown Church to participate in racially charged practices. Their particular orientation to congregational diversity is heavily rooted in racial difference and the commodification of the racialized "black urbanite." Linked to these expectations is the intersection of gender, social class, and downtown space. Although church leaders might be in a racially diverse city, they appear nonetheless to be responding to the

structural and pervasive relationship between black Americans and the urban environment. Although other racial groups are present in the membership of Downtown Church, only the management of black members concerns the pastoral staff. This is important as pastors try to attract upwardly mobile young people who can consume the city and the diversity within. Urban scholars suggest consumer appropriation creates a process in which dimensions of a racialized identity operate differently across racial groups based on the consumption of urban space (Grazian 2004; Zukin 1995). As demonstrated by Downtown Church, urban congregations participate in these processes of appropriation and consumption.

Black men, in particular, embody a form of diversity capital in the competitive urban church market. Neutered representations of black urban masculinity advance efforts toward consumable diversity schemes for church leaders. Black male volunteers display a set of gestures, style, vernacular, and behaviors considered culturally appropriate to the "downtown vibe" church leaders are trying to cultivate. Black women and other racial groups do not harness the same level of consumable capital as is offered by the presence of black men in this specific spatial context. This produces a hierarchy of racial diversity as a result of this particular interpretation of race, class, and gender in an urban space.

Ultimately, this shapes the experiences of black and nonblack members in complex ways. Namely, black men are overrepresented in second-tier leadership positions of high visibility, but they lack the power and prestige to move up the ranks as do their nonblack counterparts. Black women are removed from their volunteer positions as a way to control the visibility of blackness within the congregation. As scholars have previously reported, black members are often marginalized in multiracial congregations (Edwards 2008; Emerson and Woo 2006; Marti 2005). At Downtown Church, the marginalization of African Americans is unique, given how the pastoral staff interprets the duality of the black presence as both necessity and threat in the urban religious market.

Second, the varied conceptions of racial diversity complicate members' capacity for integration into the organizational community. Previous research on multiracial congregations depicted multiracial networks as equitable exchanges between white and nonwhite members (Emerson and Yancey 2008; Hunt and Hunt 2001). Multiracial congregations are also represented as spaces that support minorities in transcending racial identity (albeit in a complex way) in exchange for membership in the larger spiritual community (Marti 2009). However, at Downtown Church, the racial utility of African American volunteers creates a dynamic in which racial and ethnic transcendence is not an option. Conversely, Downtown Church communicates no ecclesiastic call to pursue racial diversity in its services, materials, or leadership meetings, leaving little room for discussion or accountability. Becker (1998) claimed the solution for the "problem of race" in building religious communities is for these religious spaces to become discursive ones where people can talk about their discomfort. For the members of Downtown Church, a discursive space is not provided. Instead, discussions of racial diversity are suppressed by the visible and tightly managed representation of black members.

When a church is confronted with infrastructural changes centered on the incorporation of culturally distinctive styles of worship, congregations become resistant (Ammerman 1997; Becker 1998, 1999). This notion is consistent with those found by Edwards that "interracial churches remain racially integrated to the extent that they are first comfortable places for whites to attend" (2008:6). Downtown Church pastoral staff members are adamant that they do not want their church to "go that way" or become a "black church." Rather, church leaders support a controlled form of blackness for public consumption. Therefore, they are rigorous in their drive to cater to the religious practices and rituals of the white pastoral staff, implicitly privileging whiteness and white normative styles of worship (Edwards 2008; Molotch 1972).

Furthermore, when integrating racial minorities into predominantly white spaces, racial diversity does not often affect the core culture and practices of these organizations (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2011; Collins 2011; Edwards 2008). Instead, racial diversity is often treated as an addendum to the overarching organizational structure and is sparingly addressed (Embrick 2011; Marti 2012; Marvasti and McKinney 2011). It would be easy to dismiss the predominantly white evangelical tradition as structurally ambivalent to integration, therefore rendering the church less successful in achieving racial diversity beyond visual representation (Collins 2011; Edwards 2008; Embrick 2011; Marvasti and McKinney 2011). Yet this study argues that a more focused examination of congregations of a particular type reveals more nuance to practices that are prescribed by differing visions of congregational diversity.

Urban congregations such as Downtown Church aid in understanding the mechanisms by which race is manipulated to maneuver in new religious and consumer markets. At the same time, church leaders are motivated by expectations of their racially diverse membership base. Thus, there is an emerging spectrum of orientations toward congregational diversity and racial inclusion across congregants and staff. The minority body is subsumed in the image of diversity and therefore becomes essential to diversity initiatives in the evangelical tradition, similar to those found within the consumption of urban spaces across the country (Acker 1990; Grazian 2004). For voluntary institutions such as congregations, diversity is not only a moral imperative but has also become a competitive standard in the broader American context.

Third, it is essential to recognize the duality present in the conceptualization of a church in the city. Racial diversity is essential to the urban experience, an expected component of city churches. Cultural elements, like symbols of diversity, can contain many subjective and ambiguous interpretations. Congregants and staff may rely on the same symbol or trope without necessarily agreeing what it signifies (Durkheim 1912). Members of the congregation often express a notion of a "race-less" space to worship. As diversity is an assumed feature of the city landscape, members initially are relieved by the lack of "race" talk. However, as time goes on, members interpret a sort of ambivalence toward racial inclusion in religious rituals, manipulation of diversity, or lack of awareness by the

leadership. These assumptions reflect expectations that diversity is an egalitarian endeavor in which representation is equal throughout the organization rather than something to experience or manipulate. Here members are expecting "self-consciously diverse communities" (Nyden et al. 1997) in which equal representation is institutionalized.

For the majority of the black Downtown Church members who were interviewed, "a narrative of commitment" motivates their continued service to the congregation. Even though many black volunteers find little agency in the organizational structure, they claim to be the "voice of the city" and want to remain to help the "suburban kids" develop a "true" church for the city of Chicago. So, in part, black volunteers engage the notion that a black presence in the congregation is necessary to develop a successful urban church. Consequently, black members bear greater burdens in maintaining a racially mixed worship service (Edwards 2008 Marti 2012) as their presence provides the capital needed to legitimate the church in this environment.

In the case of urban churches, interest groups draw upon the thinly shared prism of diversity to construct different interpretations of race, class, and social differences as they pursue congregational goals. For the pastoral staff, this translates into the visibility and management of black membership. Managing diversity is a way to manage the delicate balance between a downtown church, an inner-city church, a black church, and a not-too-white church.

Although this work focuses on one congregation as the unit of analysis and disallows generalizable conclusions, ethnographic work is invaluable for understanding the intricate details of group culture, identity formation, and how individuals and organizations construct their social worlds in a voluntary, racially diverse context (Edwards 2008). Future research would benefit from a comparative examination of urban churches located in downtown city centers. A multi-site ethnographic analysis could offer insight into the ways in which broader society affects contemporary religious orientation to racial diversity while extending the understanding of urban congregations and organizational diversity initiatives. Furthermore, while this study focuses on the complex relationship between spatial and religious identity, it more broadly targets the importance of organizational and local contexts to inclusion. It would be instructive to consider these superficial adaptations of diversity and inclusion occurring in other evangelical organizations across the country.

Managed diversity can be a useful framework to assess diversity initiatives within evangelical culture and voluntary organizations. But for this to succeed, it is imperative that these groups assess honestly their positions on diversity and the mechanisms they use to produce inclusion.

This study found that external structural forces coupled with cultural imaginings of the urban landscape influenced expectations of and organizational practices related to racial diversity in an urban congregation. Subsequently, if evangelical congregations continue in the pattern of seeking out membership in downtown areas, how they interact with racially diverse environments may be a prism

through which social scientists explore the use of diversity tropes to pursue competing ends in the era of color-blind ideology and contemporary diversity agendas. Multiracial congregations in urban areas are a vastly growing organizational trend amongst evangelicals, which can potentially offer us a rereading of religious geographies and the organizational patterns they create. It is in our best interest to investigate their best practices more intently.

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