

Review of "Joining the Choir: Religious Membership and Social Trust Among Transnational Ghanaians"

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**Review of “Joining the Choir: Religious Membership and Social Trust Among Transnational Ghanaians” by Nicolette D Manglos-Weber.
Oxford University Press**

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In the 1960's people from Africa made up a small proportion of the migrant population in US. However, since the mid 1960's the US have opened the doors for larger numbers of migrants from the Global South including people from Africa. As a result, the African-born population in the US today comprises close to 2 million people according to estimates from the Pew Research Center (see Manglos-Weber 2018, 2). Against this backdrop, Nicolette D. Manglos-Weber in *Joining the Choir* takes us to Accra, Ghana and Chicago, Illinois to learn about the role that religious membership plays for the integration of Christian transnational Ghanaians living in the US. Based on the personal stories of a few central characters, Manglos-Weber sheds light on how these Christian transnational Ghanaians choose their churches upon arrival in the US and on the myriad ways in which their church choice and resulting religious membership subsequently influence their process of integration in the US.

In *Joining the Choir*, we are introduced to eighteen central characters out of which we meet some in Chicago and others in Accra. This cross-national design is a major strength of Manglos-Weber's approach as it allows the reader to get a sense of both the sending and host country, providing for a better understanding of the migrants' aspirations in coming to the US. The data consist of narrative interviews and in-depth participant observation collected over a period of six years. Inspired by the work of Katz (2001), Manglos-Weber uses the concept of *turning points* in the migrants' lives to move from *how* church choice and religious affiliation works for Ghanaian migrants to *why* they choose the churches they do. This strategy is well executed throughout the book; however, one could have wished for a more detailed account of the methodological approach than what is provided in the six pages long appendix placed in the end of the book.

In the introduction, we learn that even the most successful Ghanaian migrants often face risks that make it difficult for them to establish new trust-based social networks in the US. To elaborate on those risks, Manglos-Weber draws on Bonilla-Silva's (2013) work that uses Bourdieu's (1987) concept of *habitus* to argue that the historical development of the racial order has produced stark differences in habitus between blacks and whites in the US. These differences are for example displayed in how blacks and whites tend to dress, speak, and carry themselves. Against this background, Manglos-Weber argues that the Ghanaian migrants' opportunities for moving comfortably into mixed social and professional setting with opportunities for forming trust-based social networks in the US oftentimes hinges on their ability not to "act black" and consequently be associated with underclass American blacks. This argument is compelling but distressing in its implications because it suggests that "new blacks" opportunities for integration in US depend on

their ability to navigate the tricky waters of the established racial order in US and their ability and willingness to distinguish themselves from underclass American blacks.

The key argument in *Joining the Choir* is that religious memberships for the transnational Ghanaian migrants in the US often come to serve as a symbolic indicator of trustworthiness that oftentimes helps them overcome the risks they face related to their embodiment of “blackness” and “foreignness”. In making this argument, Manglos-Weber draws on a definition of personal trust as *imaginative* or *symbolic activity* inspired among others by Georg Simmel that conceptualizes trust as a “*quasi-religious leap of faith*” (Simmel 1990, 179; see also Frederiksen 2012). This is a persuasive yet not particularly new idea as it has often been argued in the social capital literature that bonding social capital in the form of strong bonds to one’s own ethnic and religious community comprises a necessary precondition for coping with the day-to-day challenges of living in a new environment. However, a key question in social capital literature is whether the formation of bonding social capital helps or hinders the formation of bridging social capital for immigrants in new environments. Yet, readers who are looking for a clear-cut answer to this question will not find it in *Joining the Choir*. Instead, in wrestling with the question, Manglos-Weber in the spirit of the book approaches the question based on the personal story of one of the central characters. More specifically, Manglos-Weber discusses the case of, Benjamin, who when Manglos-Weber left the congregation in which he was a member gave her a card saying “To my first white lady friend”, suggesting that Benjamin was so immersed in his own ethnic and religious community that after living one and a half year in Chicago he had no other white friends. Manglos-Weber then proceeds by posing the question whether spending most of his time investing in the church had hindered Benjamin’s integration into American life; to which Manglos-Weber’s answer is: perhaps. Yet, Manglos-Weber quickly reminds us that posing such questions are problematic in their implications, because they put the onus on immigrants themselves to make the “right” choices in their religious lives to assist the process of integration.

The minor points of critique I have raised here notwithstanding, *Joining the Choir* is a well-written and well-structured book that greatly informs us about the role that religious memberships play in the lives of diverse African migrants in coping with the many challenges that they face in coming to the US. *Joining the Choir* will naturally be of particular interest to scholars with an interest in the integration of African migrants in US, but certainly also to scholars with a general interest in questions of immigration and integration.

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