Crystal was a transplant to Chicago. She had been in the city a few years, chasing a creative career in music and art. She was a fair-skinned black woman with a large auburn afro and a warm smile. She was one of the first people I [Barron] met when I moved to Chicago to pursue a graduate degree. During one of our many excursions together, Crystal turned to me, visibly excited for what she was about to share. She said, “You should come to this place I found. It is kind of like this weird church but there are a lot of hot black guys there.” Her excitement grew as she attempted to describe this peculiar place that she hesitated to call a church. Her excitement was convincing and a few days later we hopped on a bus at 5 p.m., headed downtown. We got off a few blocks from the downtown core and walked toward a large brick building. There were a few office buildings and specialty boutiques surrounding our final destination, which turned out to be a performing arts theater. The air was crisp and the wind mild but steady. It was on the warmer side of days in late September Chicago. The smell of something spicy and tangy filled the air. It was coming from an upscale Thai food restaurant across the street, with a valet parking line that reached the length of the street.

Once we turned the corner toward the front entrance of the theater, we saw two very large banners with the church’s signature logo, which mimics the Major League Baseball logo, and large letters that read “Welcome to Downtown Church.” The banners stood upright about 8 feet. They were positioned in front of a cement staircase that led to the deepest entrance to the building. As we entered, a very attractive black man and a white woman greeted us. They were stylish in their dress, greeting us with bright white smiles, eager to open the doors. Then we moved into a darkened theater lobby. The ticket counter was to my left, where a theater employee was still selling tickets for a show that would premier
the next day. The room was filled with young, attractive, well-dressed, racially diverse women and men. They all seemed to be laughing, hugging, and catching up on the week’s events. I couldn’t help but think that on first impression it felt closer to a singles mixer or “meet-up” group for young professionals than a church service. On the left side of the main entrance there were three sets of double doors, all red, and closed. Red velvet ropes, reminiscent of those used at a Hollywood premiere night, guarded them. On this night, the doors were also guarded by a 23-year-old, six-foot-three-inch-tall black man. He reminded me of a bouncer at a club; he was nicely dressed, guarding the door until the service was about to begin. In his hand he held the weekly bulletins, which he handed to attendees when the doors opened. Upon entering through the double doors we were met with live music from the worship band. The red theater seats stood out through 20 rows of stadium seating. There was a large screen above the stage and two portable screens on each side displaying the church logo. At the top of the middle section there was a large sound booth where two men sat and controlled the lights and the screens.

The service began. The band was live, loud, and upbeat, just like a pop concert. The worship band was a group of young, black, Asian, and white singers and musicians. There was a row of singers in front. Behind them were an electric guitarist, bassist, drummer, an acoustic guitarist, and a keyboardist. The music section of the worship service lasted for 22 minutes, which was almost half of the service. As the pacing and emotion of the songs built, the lights and sound adjusted accordingly; lights got brighter or dimmer as the music got softer or louder. Everyone in the congregation was standing during the entire worship set. Many were singing along with the words displayed on all three screens. Some were bobbing their heads, others had their hands up; some were doing a small dance at their seat. A couple of girls were screaming. And another group of congregants had their phones in the air, waving them around as if they were front row at a concert. One of the women sitting next to me was visiting the church for the first time. She leaned over and said, “I know this is church but I just can’t help shaking my ass to this song.” After the worship set was over, Pastor Phil walked to the center of the stage, and stood at a clear podium that held a sleek MacBook laptop. He is tall, about six-feet-four-inches, has a warm round face and strategi-
cally messy blonde hair. He wore a fitted black, button-down shirt with an embellished print across the entire shirt. He had on designer jeans and black leather shoes with a square toe. He began to deliver his message, reading from his laptop. He was shy in his delivery, making little eye contact, and stumbling through the first few points of his sermon. He wasn’t the charismatic speaker generally associated with evangelical pastors, nor did he seem to fit with the glitz and glam of the congregation. He had a much more reserved presentation. However, congregants didn’t seem to mind. Some of them clapped or shouted an encouraging “Amen” after he completed a point. Others nodded while looking up scriptures or apps on their phones. The sermon was short and ended a bit abruptly. The lights brightened, the band came back out to sing an “exit” song, and folks began to congregate, chat, and walk to the exit.

I am sure that Crystal saw the perplexed look on my face and pulled me in, saying, “see I told you, this place is strange, huh?” She began to chuckle and said, “I see the wheels in your head churning and I can literally hear your mind clicking away!” She was right. I immediately put on my “sociology hat” and began plotting a way to study what seemed to be an unconventional congregation—one that was joining a new wave of churches using unconventional spaces in city centers to appeal to young people across the country.

This book tells the story of one religious congregation that self-consciously uses “the city” and aspects of its historical and current imagery as the basis for establishing itself and attracting members. “Downtown Church,” as we call it, is a “planted” congregation, an outreach effort by a mega-church that exists well outside the metropolitan area to which it orients itself. The “home” church is non-denominational evangelical Protestant, and exists and flourishes in the context of the deep history of innovative evangelical organizational efforts to confront and convert worldly society. Downtown Church, as its extension, exists at the intersection of two distinct orientations of white evangelical Protestantism directed toward urban America. One is a deep suspicion and even fear of cities as sites of sin, social problems, and societal decay. The other is a calling to use the tools of an energetic faith to evangelize the city. Downtown Church also exists within—and in part reacts to—the deeply racialized character of American society and culture, which has its own conceptualization of the urban and all that it means.
Downtown Church aims to appeal to a particular image of the city in order to find a niche in its competitive metropolitan religious market, as well as use that image to establish a marker of collective identity that engages its target constituency—the young, upwardly mobile, and hip. In its advertisements, self-presentations during worship services and other activities, and in consistent remarks made by the pastoral leadership, Downtown Church portrays “the city” as a site of trendy excitement—a place for sophisticated, enthusiastic, and fashionable people. Consumption of material goods is assumed to be a sign of this urban trendiness, such as pricey clothing or the latest technology. Another central element assumed to represent the urban scene and its culture is “diversity.” Diversity is understood as “natural,” even definitional, to “the city.” Varieties of social backgrounds, skin colors, and aesthetic tastes mark the urban as a potpourri of cultural diversity. To be truly of and in the city, according to the guiding vision of Downtown Church, it must be a place in which diversity flourishes for all to consume.

And yet, in implementing this vision, tensions—even contradictions—abound. The church leadership studiously avoids racialized cultural expressions of worship even as it celebrates itself for not being “too white.” The congregation revels in its central city location, even as the pastoral leadership continues to live in exurban Indiana near the home church and must commute in each weekend. The fashionably clad bodies of black members are given volunteer positions that highlight their visibility and silently scream for attention to their presence, even as the actual leadership staff remains all white. And in outreach efforts designed to put the church on the map within the community, the church consistently trips over its painfully obvious lack of familiarity with Chicago politics. In its quest to fulfill its pastoral charge of becoming a “challenging, relevant and never boring” church for Chicago’s young urbanites, Downtown Church is met with the complexities of the racial legacy embedded in Chicago’s urban landscape, alongside the city’s current status as a post-industrial global city. As members, leaders, and volunteers take part in the development and production of this congregation, their different and sometimes contradictory ideas of the city are brought to the forefront.

This book examines the ways in which race, class, gender, and consumption intersect with spatial context to shape the racialized experi-
ences of members of this diverse religious organization. It argues that the urban environment fosters a particular expectation of racial diversity, what we call a “racialized urban imaginary.” This imaginary is often not articulated directly, but its existence as a part of Downtown Church’s worldview exposes the “utility” of race, that is, the usefulness of using race—and literally the bodies of persons of color—as a way to foster a particular identity for the church, which in turn legitimates the organization in its new and unfamiliar environment. Church leaders and congregants negotiate between their imagined ideas of what a church in the city should look like and the structures of inclusion and exclusion these imaginaries help to create and recreate.

Diversity and the City

“The City” has been a contested space in American history and culture. It has been contested as a social space in which many diverse groups live in physical proximity and must negotiate a coexistence. It has also been a symbolically contested space in which the meaning of the city has been disputed, celebrated, and condemned. As Orsi (1999) has observed, since the beginning of the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, the city has often been used to represent in the popular imagination a contrast to that which is “truly America”—while native-born America is conceived as white, cities are multi-hued and immigrant. While America is Protestant, cities are Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or secular. While America is temperate, cities are the sites of vice.

It has not been a coincidence that the growth of American cities has often corresponded with the influx of large numbers of immigrants. Industrialization and urbanization produced job opportunities, and large numbers of Europeans, Latin Americans, Asians, and others came to the United States to fill the ranks of factory workers in the mid- to late nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century. Significantly, many newcomers were Catholic and Jewish, and were darker-skinned (Williams 2016). It is not an exaggeration to say that cities became the place where America met the world, and many scholars have examined that multifaceted encounter (e.g., Higham 1955; Gusfield 1963; Schrag 2010). Of course, not all immigrants became city dwellers, as many saw an unsettled country as a huge draw. The United States’ westward ex-
pansion was built on exploring the frontier and searching for new land and a place to settle and build a home. But the expanding cities of the East Coast and northern industrial belt heralded a new America, and offered a direct challenge to those national stories that saw the nation as a place set apart, a New World that left the Old World and its social ills behind. Cities became seen as threats to the purity and homogeneity of small-town America, particularly in the cultural imagery of the Midwest (see Williams 2004). The proverbial “all-American boy/girl” was, and remains, white, blond, Protestant, and small-town.

Despite—and indeed, because of—the cultural mythologies of urban spaces as corrupt, fallen, and potentially dangerous, American Protestantism has also viewed cities as mission fields. While the homogenous small town may be an image that aligns well with the quintessential Protestant form of religious organization—the local congregation—attempts to convert and reform the city have been consistent in American evangelical history. Famous preachers such as Charles Grandison Finney and Dwight Moody brought their messages and their revivalist styles specifically to urban spaces, determined to save them (McLoughlin 1980). What is sometimes termed the “third Great Awakening” had an urban dimension at its very center. At the same time, the “Social Gospel” movement was also often centered in cities, such as Jane Addams’s Hull House in Chicago, in what was then a progressive attempt to “solve” the problems brought on by immigration, industrialization, and expanding metropolises (Luker 1998). Less concerned with salvation than with social reform, Social Gospel proponents nonetheless saw the emerging urban landscape as the place where Christians were most needed. Thus, while American Protestantism in many ways is rooted in the cultural story of white, rural, and small-town life, by the twentieth century it was also working diligently to make itself “at home in the city” (Lewis 1992).

More recently, the city has been a social and cultural beacon, a place to make or re-make one’s life and living, beyond just a place where there are jobs. The city has become a symbol of the energy and progress that is a major theme in the American story. It is a place where opportunity and freedom await, where entrepreneurial activity produces our proud economic affluence, where human-built national icons such as the Empire State Building have announced our place on the world stage. The city is a place where there is cultural richness, excitement, and adventure, and
where the diversity that we have claimed to value in America is most on display.

Thus, the cultural “imaginary” of the city in American life is complex, multifaceted, and occasionally contradictory. It produces allure and revulsion, with unintended and contradictory effects on social and cultural dynamics. However, it is not static. Diversity has long been understood as a defining feature of modern society (Simmel 1971). But by the 1980s, the embrace of neoliberal urban development strategies by city governments resulted in a consumer-based posture toward diversity. As Zukin (1995) and Grazian (2004, 2007) have shown, the “urban experience” has become a commodity for consumption; the affluent and educated middle class has come to expect to consume diversity as part of the city experience (see, for example, Hummon 1990). Such expectations of diversity align easily with an internationalist and individualist vision that sees racial and ethnic differences as exotic, aesthetically pleasing, and simultaneously slightly dangerous but controlled. It is not unlikely, then, that congregations moving into metropolitan areas would engage in a form of cultural production that makes use of urban symbols of consumption. Downtown Church, in its explicit orientation to this ethos, may be more unusual.

Any discussion of race and urbanicity within the United States is a discussion of racial inequality and segregation of black Americans, who remain at the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder (Massey and Denton 1993). Throughout US history, economic, social, and political transitions have been guided by oppressive legal and ideological traditions which have resulted in the entrenchment and persistence of black disadvantage (Wilson 1996). Within the context of space, these patterns have resulted in black Americans being disproportionately concentrated in urban locations, making urban ghettos synonymous with the black community (Massey and Denton 1993; Wacquant 2001).

In much of mainstream discourse, “urban” has become a euphemism for “black” in describing neighborhoods, cultural styles of music and dress, and social problems such as gangs or drugs (Johnson 2003). The perpetuation of this linkage can be referred to as racialization, a process of ascribing racial or ethnic identities to a relationship, social practice, location, or group that did not identify itself as such (Omi and Winant 1994). Racialization is often born out of a power struggle where one
group ascribes an identity to the other for the purpose of continued domination. Similarly, *racial formation*, a concept also popularized by Omi and Winant (1994), is described as “a process occurring through a linkage between structure and representation . . . a racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (56). Consequently, racialized images and history connect with a consumerist approach to engaging the city.

“Urban” is also an adjective that calls up images of young people, cutting-edge style, and progressive cultural politics—instantiated in such phrases as “Young Urban Professionals” or in brandings such as “Urban Outfitters.” Urban congregations capitalize on “black as urban” as well as “young urban professional” in their pursuit of diversity. Diversity thus becomes an interactive process, engaging race in both direct and non-racial ways (Berrey 2005).

**Race and White Evangelical Protestantism**

Just as the encounter with the city has been ambivalent for white evangelical Protestantism, so has been its encounter with race, racial segregation, and racial inequality in the United States. At a very basic level, it is not unfair to observe that the most solidly evangelical region of the country is also the region that was most marked by slavery, had a legal racial apartheid system, and continues to be most conservative on issues of race and racial equality. Emerson and Smith (2000) and Wadsworth (2014), among others, show convincingly the ways in which evangelicalism has supported, either directly or indirectly, racial segregation and inequality.

On the other hand, some white evangelicals have tackled directly the problem of racism in American society and their own responsibility for it. Some of this effort has been connected to the missionary impulse to evangelize all peoples, but there have also been concerted efforts toward what is often called “racial reconciliation” (Emerson and Smith 2000).

One result of these efforts is called the Evangelical Racial Change Movement (ERCM). The marquee goal is to have, where feasible, churches that seek to create racially and ethnically diverse, culturally syncretic congregations, wherein no single ethnic group or worship style
dominates (Emerson and Woo 2006; Wadsworth 2014). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the messages of racial diversity and racial reconciliation were increasingly overlapping among white evangelicals, resulting in an effort by many Christians to worship in racially diverse congregations—a similar push for diversity as that seen in secular organizations around that same time. As a result, multiracial congregations in urban areas have become a growing organizational trend among evangelicals.

Religious congregations are one of the most pervasive public gathering places in American society. Chaves (2004:1) noted, “no voluntary or cultural institution in American society gathers more people more regularly than religious congregations.” Yet, like many institutions in this country, congregations are faced with the rapidly changing racial demographics of the United States and they struggle to integrate their organizations (Emerson and Woo 2006). Christian-based congregations, in particular, garner much attention from scholars as organizations that largely remain racially segregated despite sincere efforts to fulfill their moral ethos of come one, come all (DeYoung et al. 2003).

Multiracial congregations are notable, even if not common, as racial diversity is quite rare in most social institutions in the United States. Multiracial congregations have been covered not only in evangelical media outlets such as Christianity Today, but in the likes of TIME magazine, the Huffington Post, and E! network’s short-lived reality show, “Rich in Faith.” As a result, some scholars, evangelical leaders and intellectuals, and many clergy are eager to understand how religious racial diversity could contribute to challenging or even dismantling systems of social stratification (Cobb, Perry, and Dougherty 2015; Christerson and Emerson 2003). Multiracial congregations also offer insights into organizational structures that create race-centered initiatives of incorporation and keep discussion of racial difference at the forefront of their motivations for integration (Collins 2011).

In Ambivalent Miracles, Wadsworth (2014) meticulously traces the rise and evolution of the ERCM (1990–2010) that spearheaded the corporate charge to worship in racially diverse congregations. The ERCM transitioned to promote what evangelicals called the Multiethnic Church Movement (MEC). For ERCM advocates, multi-ethnic congregations are the pinnacle of reconciliation efforts (Emerson and Woo 2006). The
ERCM and MEC spawned a lively debate on the role of race in diverse religious organizations either as a salient feature that inevitably produces congregational division (Edwards 2008) or as a status attendees transcend in multi-ethnic settings to achieve a collective identity as believers (Marti 2008). Multiracial congregations are often defined as: (1) a congregation where no one racial group is 80% or more of the membership; or (2) a congregation in which there is a likelihood that two randomly selected people in the congregation will belong to different racial groups (Emerson and Woo 2006; Dougherty and Huyser 2008).

A recent report by the 2010 Faith Communities Survey found that 14% of US congregations are multiracial. While this number seems small, the increase in interracial marriages, the sizable growth among immigrant and multiracial populations, and the overall increase of populations of color within the last three decades (Lee and Bean 2007) will more than likely contribute to the proliferation of multiracial congregations across the nation. Because the previously mentioned study shows that a growing percentage of minorities are attending religious services in multiracial congregations, many of which are newly established, a comprehensive understanding of the association between congregational characteristics and race-related outcomes must give attention to these emerging congregations.

Sociological research on multiracial and multi-ethnic congregations has examined the dynamics that keep Christian congregations in the United States largely racially segregated (e.g., Edwards 2008; Emerson and Yancey 2008; Marti 2008). A number of important insights have been generated by this work—arguably the most significant is the importance of organizational intentionality. The dynamics uncovered help to shed light on the efficacy in confronting race and racial privilege for congregations that want to integrate (Emerson and Woo 2006). Drawing from organizational sociology and the sociology of race and ethnicity, the research has two main premises. First, the organizational characteristics have an impact on individual-level outcomes for those involved, including beliefs and attitudes, and organizational diversity (or for Blau 1977, “differentiation”) can have adverse effects on the attitudes and experiences of the organization’s members (Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005; Emerson and Woo 2006; Martinez and Dougherty 2013). Second, that race is central to the organization of society and its insti-
tutions, and multiracial congregations generally need to placate white members, and affirm their religio-cultural preferences and interests, in order to sustain their participation (Edwards 2008). This argument suggests that multiracial congregations remain racialized, and will, in most cases, reaffirm rather than challenge racial norms in America.

However, despite growing attention to the role of organizational characteristics in shaping the beliefs, identities, behaviors, and experiences of multiracial church attendees, there are some limitations in that literature. First, the majority of these studies in this area view racial processes as more or less self-standing, devoid of any mention of gender and economic class (Yancey and Kim 2008). In contrast, works by “intersectionality” scholars show that a myriad of statuses and identities, particularly those based on race, class, and gender, combine to shape the life experiences of groups (Collins 1999; Crenshaw 1993; Read and Eagle 2011). Persons have multiple identities, different ones of which may be salient in different social settings or actions. In turn, these multiple identities affect how they are perceived and treated by other people and within social institutions. Second, and most important, many studies of multiracial congregations tend to focus on successful and large multiracial congregations in cities in which measures of residential segregation are lower than the national average. Thus, there is a certain amount of “sampling on the dependent variable” involved—which leads to uncertainty regarding whether the dynamics of such congregations are the same when the congregations are new, are small, or are in different geographical settings. Exploring these trends within a city that has a special history with residential segregation is particularly imperative.

Religious Congregations and the City

The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion reported in 2008 that recent organizational trends have resulted in an increased percentage of Christian-based congregations moving into downtown metropolitan areas in order to sustain organizational growth—downtown areas that are of course in the processes of urbanization, gentrification, increasing diversity, and continuing racial residential segregation. The increase in diversity in such cities is notable. Whereas the proportion of non-white groups in US metropolitan areas stood at 16.6% in 1980, by 2010 the
proportion had risen to 28.6% (Lee, Iceland, and Sharp 2012). This trend was particularly pronounced in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Chicago.

Many Mainline Protestant churches have been grappling with the demographic changes of city centers for years (e.g., Form and Dubrow 2005). They have had to adjust programming, welcome new social groups into the congregation, and negotiate with downtown businesses and commercial interests in order to maintain their impressive—but aging—church buildings. As Ammerman (1997) and others have shown, some have managed these changes more successfully than others, and one of the challenges they face are newly planted evangelical congregations.

The spatial shifts among evangelical congregations, which are included in this increasing presence in cities, are slowly but noticeably bucking the tide of “white flight” out of urban areas. These shifts engender questions about how traditionally homogeneous organizations make demographic transitions. How do they become inclusive? Do the experiences of varied racial groups within a church differ when a congregation exists in a more diverse spatial context? How might a different racial context affect organizations that have historically been (and in many cases still remain) racially segregated? The dynamics of religion, race, and the city have received substantial research attention in recent years (e.g., Marti 2008; McRoberts 2003; Patillo-McCoy 1999), but despite these studies, the organizational practices through which predominately white religious organizations interact with new, racially diverse environments as they develop a new organizational identity remain unclear.

The move of new populations back into downtown areas—whether gentrifying yuppies or new empty-nesters wanting more neighborhood amenities and less house-and-yard maintenance—has also resulted in part in a mainstream merging of commercial and religious culture. Increasing numbers of congregations are trying to provide a place for congregants to reconcile the traditional tensions between “holiness” and the broader consumer culture. Downtown Church is an excellent example of this effort—it wants to use the city to establish a niche in a competitive metropolitan religious setting, as well as using the image of “the city” as a marker of collective identity that speaks to the young, hip, “unchurched” urban dweller. The church meets in the rented theater building in the city’s downtown, holding services on Sunday evenings,
and self-consciously uses the location to proclaim itself as different, authentic, and urban.

The notion of “city-life” is embedded in the church’s experience of place and the built environment, its boundaries, expectations, inclusions, and fabrications. Part of the city’s allure is its cultural location, as a place where the middle class (who increasingly have trouble affording to live in the affluent parts of major cities) can consume diversity—as experience, as entertainment, and as a part of personal identity (Lloyd 2006; Mele 2000). However, their expectations of dress, speech, consumption, and racial interaction can serve as reminders of the rigidity of the color line and enact a static notion of the city. It is at this intersection of consumption, place, and identity that this book explores what we will call the racialized urban imaginary of Downtown Church and the structures of inclusion and exclusion that they help to create and recreate.

Authenticity and the Imaginary

This book refers to the “imagined” city for two reasons. The first is inductive from the research itself. In the overwhelming majority of interviews and throughout our ethnographic work, we found Downtown Church congregants and leaders continually using the term “imagine” to make a distinction between the ways in which the suburban-based leadership team and city-based congregants envisioned “their city.” Often there was a connotation of criticism in the use of the term—congregants from Chicago thought the leadership “imagined” the city to be different from what it was in reality. Sometimes the connotation of “imagine” was more like “imagination,” reflecting the idea that something new or innovative was developing. In either case, and for both church leaders and members, they were talking, planning, and acting within the context of an “imaginary”—a set of cultural ideas and images that form a mental picture. This book’s goal is not to prove which imagination is “correct” or, in cases of disagreement, which opinion is more valid. Instead, its aim is to discuss how these varied and oftentimes dueling imaginations rely on racialized, classed, and place-based understandings of the city of Chicago and of its urban residents.

In Benedict Anderson’s famous work Imagined Communities (1991), he described the idea of the nation imagined. He argued that if one feels
oneself to be a member of a nation, one feels a certain kinship or connection to people one has never and will never meet; in part, one must imagine that connection rather than experience it directly. The nation is a fraternity of “limited imaginings” made up of “horizontal comrade-ship” and culturally significant systems tied to what is imagined. Conceptually, this framing of imagined communities describes, to a certain extent, the dynamic of the imagined city for Downtown Church. As they seek to develop the identity of a church in the city of Chicago and for the city of Chicago, congregants and leaders wrestle not only with their conception of the city but also with each other’s imagined city. Furthermore, these congregants and leaders rely on each other logistically to sustain the church and to creatively grow the church into their ideal congregation.

Second, the idea of the “imagined city” guides our discussion of “authenticity.” Leaders of Downtown Church are eager to create an authentic urban establishment in order to attract authentic urban members. Thus, we conceptualize authenticity as a cultured understanding of what is real and true, in contrast to what is faked, put on, or superficial. Authenticity is informed by a collective imagination; it is itself not objective but simply a more-or-less shared set of beliefs about the nature of things we value in the world because they can be relied upon to be “real.” Authenticity is reinforced by the conscious efforts of cultural producers and consumers alike. David Grazian (2004) notes that authenticity shares two related aspects, one of which will be used throughout our analysis, “it can refer to the ability of a place or event to conform to an idealized representation of reality; that is, to set expectations regarding how such a thing ought to look, sound and feel” (10). Authenticity is alluring to outsiders due to its status as something that is not readily accessible to the mainstream public—in a sense, a privileged mystique. However, the search for authenticity as true and not consciously created will always be a failing prospect as authenticity is always manufactured (Grazian 2004; Peterson 1997). Moreover, the search for authenticity presumes a static existence rather than a complex and contradictory one. Thus, in the quest for authenticity, we tend to rely on stereotypes, often frozen from a particular point in time, as a guide (Grazian 2004; Johnson 2003). Richard Peterson (1997) claims that authenticity is not inherent in an object or event that is designated to be authentic, but
rather is a socially agreed-upon construct. Thus, authenticity is ironically always fabricated.

Similarly, Grazian (2004) suggests there is a sliding scale of authenticity and thus almost anything can be regarded as more or less authentic in relation to its competitors. The sliding scale allows tailoring of collective memory and fabrication of authenticity to serve the needs of the present. As a result, the business of authenticity can be a lucrative market (Grazian 2004; Peterson 1997). Capturing authenticity through fabrication to meet culturally shaped expectations is a common strategy by producers in cultural industries such as film, television, music, or art.

Authenticity can also be a place-based concept as place is equally valuable for cultural production. The allure of standing on the exact same location as Emily Dickinson, Martin Luther King, Jr., or C. S. Lewis helps to drive tourist industries around the world. Discussions of authenticity are often dependent upon a shared understanding of a particular place or location (Grazian 2004; Lloyd 2006; Peterson 1997). Downtown Church uses the expectations of urban space to set the expectations for how their church should look, sound, and feel. However, neither leaders nor members are positioned to claim authentic Chicago fully, simply because it does not exist as an unchanging entity.

An Ethnographic Exploration

This book employs an ethnographic approach to explore the cultural contours of Downtown Church, its orientations to congregational diversity, how it shapes its actual organizational practices, and how that dynamic illuminates broader currents in American religious culture as religious organizations grapple with how to engage with and become a part of urban environments across the nation. The volume draws on a systematic analysis of race-related and consumer-oriented discourse in 55 semi-structured and ethnographic interviews, and content analysis of sermons, marketing materials, and web content, combined with 18 months of fieldwork. In all aspects of this work we were dedicated to understanding the attendant fears, goals, and organizational practices surrounding the presence of certain minority groups within the congregation, and to investigating these orientations and practices as having gendered and classed dimensions as well as racial ones.
First author Barron collected all the empirical data and conducted all interviews. As a racially ambiguous, single woman of color, working with a predominantly white, male leadership staff, her presence generated insightful exchanges. Barron was repeatedly questioned about her racial identity by the pastoral staff, who often had difficulty placing her ethno-racially. She was often approached by the pastoral staff regarding her “unique look” and engaged in discussions about how her racial ambiguity could help pastors traverse racial boundaries within the congregation. Pastors rarely asked her directly to racially identify, but would ask her, for example, “What are black people saying [or what are the Latino members saying] in your interviews?”

Barron’s racial identity wasn’t the only topic of discussion. The pastoral staff had many concerns surrounding her “singleness” as it pertained to interviewing their male congregants and leaders. She had to convince the leadership staff that she was a trained social scientist and that interviewing is part of a scientific method—not a way to pick up single men at the church. In many ways, her status as a graduate student provided her with the authority, class rank, and respect that her gender did not. However, as other women who engage in ethnographic methods have experienced, some congregants took her offer for an interview as an open invitation for a date. Barron routinely maneuvered through these gendered and raced interactions from the “outsider within” perspective (Lorde 1984:114; Collins 1999), offering a distinct lens through which to explore the intersection of race, class, and gender within the congregation.

This book examines various components of Downtown Church including its history, organizational structure, programming and marketing materials, outreach endeavors, rituals, and worship services. We engaged in participant observation of evening worship services and other church-related activities such as dinners, leadership meetings, and community-building events. Field notes were taken during all services and church-related activities. All field notes were recorded on pads of paper during the services. Note-taking during the worship service is common in evangelical congregations, as congregants regularly bring Bibles and take notes on the pastor’s lesson; thus, this activity did not disturb congregants as they worshipped. However, during other church-related activities, notes were jotted on napkins and on a smart phone.
These notes were then coded based on recurring themes centered on references to the city, racial and gendered patterns in group dynamics, interracial interactions, references to/use of technology, use of popular culture and consumption in sermons, and congregational changes over time.

Thirty-five ethnographic interviews and 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews were transcribed and coded with the aid of two assistants. Ethnographic interviews differ from semi-structured ones in that the former are usually conducted in the field and not at a separate location. There is not a written set of questions and a particular order in which they are asked. Ethnographic interviews are sometimes referred to as unstructured interviews (Bell 1995; Whyte 1993). They are interviews conducted in the field to uncover new topics of interest; gain understandings of meanings behind a specific event, ritual, or practice; or to capture reactions and responses to an event (e.g., a sermon, outreach event, women’s group) in that moment (Burawoy 1998). Although many of these interviews appear to be simple conversations, both parties were aware that it was an informal interview process. Additionally, in the beginning of fieldwork, ethnographic interviews are especially useful for getting the lay of the land and gaining trust among the people involved in the social settings being examined (Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003; Brown-Saracino, Fine, and Thurk 2008). The ethnographic interviews lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours, and were conducted with 15 men and 20 women, ranging in ages from 19 to 47.

The semi-structured interviews were a convenience sample. Barron conducted all of the semi-structured interviews after one year of being in the field. The formal interviewing was delayed so that Barron could develop relationships and generate a consistent and visible presence in the church. There is an intimate quality to sacred spaces, and relationships in congregations can be quite intense and meaningful for church members. Barron handed out flyers before and after worship services at the information tables and around the theater lobby, outlining the study and need for participants. Interview criteria were women and men, 18 years of age and over who had attended the church consistently for at least three months. These interviews were recorded on a digital recorder. Interviews were conducted in offices, coffee shops, restaurants, and in some cases, the home of the participant.
Ten women and ten men, who ranged in age from 22 to 42 years and ranged in racial and ethnic background, participated in formal interviews. Participants also ranged in their levels of church involvement. However, 60% of those interviewed were in some leadership or volunteer position during their time at the church. This significant engagement was due in part to the church being fairly new and relatively small. Many people who attended became involved in volunteer work at one time in their membership just to help the church get up and running. Pseudonyms are used for all participants (they chose their own pseudonyms) and for places within Chicago. The name of the church has also been changed.

We chose to study one evangelical congregation as the unit of analysis as religious congregations are the core organizational form of religion in the United States (Chaves 2004). The religious congregation has received an extraordinary amount of attention from sociologists interested in American religion. As the preeminent religious organizational form in the United States, we know a great deal, for example, about congregations going through transitions (e.g., R. Stephen Warner’s *New Wine in Old Wineskins*), or the building of collective identity and religious belief (e.g., Nancy Ammerman’s *Bible Believers*). We know about how congregations handle conflict (Penny Edgell Becker’s *Congregations in Conflict*), and we have several works of great comparative scope (e.g., Nancy Ammerman’s *Pillars of Faith*; Mark Chaves’s *Congregations in America*). We have excellent work on congregations dealing with racial marginalization (Lincoln and Mamiya’s *The Black Church in the African American Experience*), cultural alienation (Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith*), or as sites of immigrant adaptation (e.g., R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner’s *Gatherings in Diaspora*). Although such ethnographic study does not allow for generalizable “findings,” it is invaluable for understanding the intricate details of group culture, identity formation, and how individuals and organizations construct their social worlds in a given context (Edwards 2008; Burawoy 1998). Downtown Church is a site that allows for a particularly in-depth examination of the relationships between race and place. Its self-consciousness about being in “the city” brings to the surface both explicit and implicit understandings of race, religion, and urban society. Downtown Church thinks that it needs racial diversity in order to appear to be “authentic” and representative.
of the city, and it promotes this “authenticity” in ways that reflect its assumptions about race, as evident in its advertising campaigns and in its use of members of color in the congregation in highly visible volunteer positions. But in their effort to draw in religious consumers, church leaders are offering a religious space that reproduces social inequality.

This work contributes to the growing collection of studies on urban religious organizations and multiracial churches, as well as emerging scholarship on intersectionality and congregational characteristics in American religious life. It fills a gap in the research on race and religion by extending the focus to the racialization and consumption of place and its effects on religious establishments. By turning the lens of critical studies of race upon religious spaces, this book illuminates the dynamic relationship between racial inequality and religious identity.

What This Book Offers . . .

This book offers an examination of a conceptual framework that we call the racialized urban imaginary. This is a constellation of cultural images and themes that Downtown Church’s leadership and many members use when thinking of themselves as building a church “of and for the city.” This framework involves understandings of the city and its relationship to race, ethnicity, and consumer culture. Like all imaginaries, it informs actual behaviors and organizational planning by influencing what people think is real, and thus what can be done, as well as informing what people think is right or proper, and thus what should be done. We call it “racialized” because the urban imaginary used is deeply intertwined with perceptions and understandings about race and diversity. Thus, the racialized urban imaginary situates the relationship between race and place and acts as a motivating factor for the types of expectations leaders and members bring to the construction of their congregation. During our observations, we found that church leaders and congregants teetered between a consumption-oriented ideology of what makes a city unique and exciting, and a model of racialized authenticity that assumed that being ethno-racially diverse was constitutive of the urban. Both the consumer and the racialized orientations worked to shape how the church understood religion in the city. These orientations, however, were not an either/or set of discreet choices. They were intertwined, such that ethno-racial
diversity became another aspect of the city that was to be “consumed” as a way of being authentically urban. This imaginary shows us how cultural values and religious identity are deeply embedded in the structures of race, especially when enacted in an urban location. Like many nightclubs, restaurants, and other urban establishments, Downtown Church engages in a form of racially charged production and consumption due to the racialization of the urban landscape (Grazian 2004, 2007).

This book sheds light on the nuances of the racialized urban imaginary and how it affects the religious practices, organization, and identity of this newly formed congregation. We pay specific attention to an organizational practice we have conceptualized as managed diversity. Managed diversity describes an approach to portraying the church’s “brand”—its image—as diverse and “hip” to external audiences who might be interested in the congregation, as well as to the church members themselves as a means of self-understanding. Managed diversity reflects a series of techniques church officials engage in: (1) to appropriate elements of urban blackness both in its cultural forms and in the literal bodies of church members who are people of color; (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 being “too white,” but also tries to keep the church from being perceived as a “black church.” It aims to create a public image and a self-identity as a racially diverse, authentically urban establishment appropriate for a young urban demographic.

Last, this book examines what we define as the racial utility of racially diverse congregants, as a tool that leaders use in managing diversity and authenticating their identity as a church for the city of Chicago. Racial utility occurs when the racial status of an individual serves the corporate needs of those in authority, in this case, the leadership staff at Downtown Church. In this congregation, the racial utility of members of color is incorporated to symbolize a fabricated diversity, imagined as a necessity for a church located in the city. Racial integration is done in ways that are nonthreatening to the organizational control of white leaders who in many ways are unfamiliar with the racial heterogeneity in their congregation. While the belief in the necessity of racialized bod-
ies in an urban location is not a new concept for urban establishments (Grazian 2004; Johnson 2003), the adaptation of these methods by a religious organization is relatively new territory in the organizational survival methods of religious congregations.

These three ideas exist in something of an embedded conceptual order, with the racialized urban imaginary as a grounding (or overarching) set of understandings and assumptions within which the congregation exists, and managed diversity as a set of techniques organizational leaders employ to align their vision of the church with their understandings of “the city.” Finally, racial utility emerges as a specific technique that reveals clearly the connections between race, religion, and the city.

What to Expect

Chapter 1 surveys the history of Downtown Church, its leadership structure, and efforts to distinguish itself as a “downtown” church rather than an “inner-city” church. It analyzes how white church leaders, as outsiders from the suburbs of Indiana, came to pastor a church in an urban location. Further, it examines some of the larger cultural understandings of Chicago specifically. This discussion sets up a solid conceptual framework for the presentation of more “up close” fieldwork material (participant observation and interviews) from within the congregation and within its outreach endeavors. Chapter 2 focuses on the process of constructing an urban identity for Chicago’s young adults. It illustrates how the pastoral staff, as cultural producers, manufactures and promotes authenticity through gendered and class-based assumptions of the city, as becomes evident in their advertising campaigns, worship space, and sermonizing. Chapters 3–5 each address a specific group and/or organizational practice in order to advance our understanding of how Downtown Church leaders and congregants break new ground for their church while negotiating racial boundaries as they foster a distinctive organizational identity. Chapter 3 examines the pursuit of a racialized authenticity by church leaders through “managed diversity.” This practice involves the explicit management of the visible presence of their black volunteers as a direct response to the structural relationship between black Americans and the urban environment. Chapter 4
examines the church’s participation in a city-sponsored men’s basketball league and as volunteers at one of the worst inner-city high schools in Chicago. As congregants and leaders get involved in outreach endeavors, it results in more substantive social contact across race, class, and in some cases, gender divides. The use of racial utility, and its intersection with the racialized urban imaginary, becomes particularly clear. Chapter 5 exposes the complexities of navigating the urban environment and its diversity through unforeseen romantic interracial interactions. The rumors and gossip surrounding interracial couples by church leaders and congregants work as boundary markers for particular types of interracial interaction deemed appropriate within this urban congregation. Chapter 6 then shows how, despite systematic forms of exclusion on the part of the leadership, a variety of outcomes emerges from the “managed diversity” framework. These include a discourse of commitment and hope among volunteer staff and members who are dedicated to a racially integrated religious experience in a racially divided city. This discourse promotes an active participant model—fueled by the frustration of living in segregated Chicago—advocated by a majority of participants that looks different from previous work on integrated congregations. The Conclusion provides a summary of the major arguments of the book, synthesizing the mechanisms through which the racialized urban imaginary informs white church leaders and diverse congregants of the practices and ideologies needed to create an unconventional religious space in an urban city.