

Introduction

ANA'S ANGELS

“You know how the angels piece me and this cart together?” The question comes from Ana, a young Black woman and Evangelical believer living in Rio de Janeiro’s *subúrbios*. “My legs and arms become the cart,” she continues, “and, as I walk the highway, God holds me and metal together.” Ana’s typically calm voice is tinged with anxiety as she explains this to me. “The angels piece me and this cart together,” she says again, a little firmer now. It’s “a way to pray,” she insists: this act of patching the cart together—forcing wheels onto axles and carefully slotting the metal sheeting onto each side—is a way to talk with God.

The heavy metal bars hit the pavement with a jarring clank as Ana and the angels work together. The cart is a collection of rusty poles, large wheels, and a few pieces of metal sheeting that need to be assembled again and again each morning, as Ana fears the cart will be stolen if she leaves it intact overnight on her front stoop. She needs it each day for her work delivering bottles of homemade disinfectant to Evangelical shops. So early every morning Ana slides cold metal between hands, gently fitting pieces back together. Using her body as an anchor, she heaves each heavy piece off the cement ledge that borders her home, then twists the parts into place to fit warped metal back together.

I can hear her sigh as the cart comes together. Ana exhales in relief. I see her shoulders relax; her tense muscles go slack. Her body folds in toward itself, resting. The cart is still here. No part is too rusty. The wheels still roll. Ana tells me that, amid all the morning noise, no one notices as the angels come to her. The angels sing in her ears as they set to work, she says, and she smiles as they turn her body to steel, piecing skin and metal together. Her limbs now metal, she explains that she is full of God's strength for the day. She tells me, "They turn my body into a *bênção* [blessing]."

She breathes in and pushes her slight body forcefully against the cart. Her bare shoulder—twisted, ready to lever—makes the cart roll forward off the ledge. It holds. Her vessel is worthy. To this feat she responds, "Amen." Ana endures the angel's work with notable cheer. The cart is necessary. So she gives her body over to it. This is God working in her life, she insists. But this work is also painful, and Ana is sometimes uncertain. There have been accidents on the side of the highway. Her arms and legs are scarred, and she has sores that refuse to heal, despite her cheer. The car had swerved, her body and her cart tossed to the side. "No one means to harm me," she says. And yet. "The angels will hold us as we travel today. They won't let us come to harm. The angels hold us tight. They walk this road with us."

THE EXHAUSTED ROUTES OF THE STATE

This book approaches Evangelical faith in Rio's *subúrbios* by attending closely to the choreography of feeling perceptible in Ana's daily work: mercy, joy, and love; duty, pain, and failure. In doing so it demonstrates the centrality of religious desire and sensation to contemporary politics and political subjectivity. Evangelicalism has changed the way people understand the role of the state in their lives as well as citizenship and belonging in Brazil more broadly. It has reoriented political hopes and horizons, such that organized leftist causes and other well-worn routes out of systemic injustice are often cast aside, seen as no longer workable. Evangelicals routinely showed and told me these routes—political recognition, NGO activism, party politics, protests in the street—are exhausted.

The state is not a project they can invest hope in. Instead, they have turned elsewhere. They go with God.

Believers, like Ana, have put their faith in angels. They go with God, not politicians, NGOs, or workers. This kind of belief—and how it transforms both believers and the city itself—is often hard to put into words. Their faith, Evangelicals say, is something they know and sense in their bodies. It is a feeling in the body and shared between bodies: a trace, a pulse, a coursing.¹ Evangelicalism makes people feel worthy, desired, and secure, if only fleetingly. There is a feeling that the angels are there with them, deeming them worthy. People seek this out, which makes sense, as their lives in Rio's *subúrbios* are anything but worthy and secure.

Ana lives in Batan, where I came to live with my partner and children as a PhD student. It is a small favela, a mostly typical community in Rio's suburban landscape.² Since the early 1990s Evangelicalism in Rio's western *subúrbios* has become increasingly important, just as it has city- and countrywide. As the Catholic faith slowly dwindles among Brazilians, Evangelical belief surges (Vital da Cunha 2018).³ The everyday effects of this belief are obvious in the *subúrbios* themselves: makeshift Evangelical churches emerge everywhere, a material testament to the decentralized practices of this way of believing. New Evangelical churches seem to bloom in the cracks; they grow out of corner shops, in store fronts, and even on the steps of people's homes.

Rio is often called the Marvelous City, drawing eyes to the spectacle of particular people, spaces, and topographies. Conjure Rio in your mind's eye. What can you see? The curve of the sea? Jesus on the cliff? The emerald mountains? This iconic city has been so thoroughly lodged in global imaginations—from the city authorities who advertised Rio as an attractive colonial outpost (the “Paris of the tropics”) to the foreign pastor returning home to their congregation with tales of their mission work or the traveler with a thin but tantalizing story of being mugged on the beach. In films and photography the idea of Rio has long been crafted along these predictable lines and scales. Its topography, both physical and social, has long provoked attention, with its vibrant favelas nestled into cliffsides, almost but not quite tipping into the affluent leafy streets below. Meanwhile, Ana and the angels piece her cart together on the edge of that spectacle, indeed outside of it. While the term *suburban* often conjures

bucolic images of gated communities, Rio's western *subúrbios* tend to be defined from afar as wastelands that bleed out from the marvelous center. Batan sits along Avenida Brasil, a major highway built in the 1940s that bisects the expansive western *subúrbios* it helped expand—a stretch of land about twenty-five miles from Rio's downtown and southside beaches with their neatly tiled promenades. These largely flat and happenstance suburbs are mostly ignored in imaginaries of Rio.

Unlike the favelas that tower over Copacabana and Ipanema's beaches, Rio's *subúrbios* are spaces produced through relegation and commonly imagined as such. They sprawl out from the center; *sprawl* here seems to suggest a kind of overflow or spill, as if urban peripheries are always unplanned and messy, forever informal and grotesque, like a creeping stain on the urban landscape. Like a wasteland, they are imagined as undesirable but also useful as a space where "waste" can be hidden away: prisons, polluting industrial production, public housing, and cheap *diaristas* (day laborers) all find a home here. They exist amid patchwork water pipes and pavement that turns to dirt roads, where cars give way to horse-drawn carts. These suburbs are also always incomplete and provisional; they are new insofar as they repurpose the old from elsewhere.

The banal racialization of the *subúrbios*—the space itself and the people inhabiting this space—is closely connected to the way it is imagined as being peripheral to Rio itself.⁴ In public discussion and practice, the *subúrbios* figure in notions of waste—wasteland, human waste, a waste of space. The term *periphery* represents more than just a deficiency of infrastructure and services; it is also used to refer to the Black people who live in them. The racialization of the *subúrbios*—based on a racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness—is in this sense both symbolic and material. Making sense of such encompassing conditions means paying attention to how Black communities were and are systematically disenfranchised, producing a conception of the *subúrbios* as a repugnant periphery. I use the term *subúrbios* throughout this book as a way out of the center/periphery dualism, if imperfectly. I avoid the term *periphery* as a descriptor of place, as I think it reifies the west side's relationship to Rio's center in a way that is not helpful. Using the term *subúrbios* helps in foregrounding the historical processes that construct this enduring dualism, as well as reflecting more local ways of understanding space.⁵

Batan is a community long impacted by the violent oscillations of the state. Three years before I came to Batan, in September 2007, a militia made up of armed off-duty police agents ousted the Amigos dos Amigos, a prison-based organization that had held and governed the community for more than two decades. In the western *subúrbios*, as elsewhere in this city, the everyday governance of communities has long been fractured and overlapping, divided between organizations born out of mass incarceration and *milícias* (parapolice groups organized and made up of off-duty police officers and firefighters). Numerous *milícias* originated out of a local desire to “reclaim” their communities from gangs. Many, however, became blatant rent extractors and rudimentary protection rackets, with shady connections to electoral politics, “taxing” the informal economy and the people who live in the communities they govern on everything from internet access and van transportation to operating a motorcycle taxi and running businesses—and, of course, for security itself. They also govern under the threat of extreme violence, much like the drug traffickers before them.

Less than a year after the militia took over, several journalists from the well-known Brazilian newspaper *O Dia* moved into Batan to conduct an undercover investigative report on the rise of Rio’s militias, which had garnered increased attention for their use of violence and shadow-state activities. The journalists wanted to get a good story about these parastate operatives, their links to the illicit economies of the favelas, and their violence. Less than two weeks after their arrival in Batan, however, the journalists’ cover was blown. On the night of May 16, 2008, six militia members forced their way into the journalists’ rented house, demanding all of their video and audio recordings. When the search was unsuccessful, the militia members became violent. They held a journalist, photographer, and driver hostage and tortured them for over six hours. After electrocuting them, they began asphyxiating them with plastic bags, while threatening to drop them off in a neighboring public-housing block where they believed traffickers would discover and kill them (Claudino 2011).

This case placed a spotlight on the prevalence and violence of militias in the city more broadly. Whereas the municipal and national governments of Rio and Brazil had previously been outwardly ambivalent about militias, this violence against recognized public figures generated public pressure to respond. Rio’s state government established a Parliamentary Inquiry with

a remit to investigate militia prevalence across the city, including the links between militias and local and municipal politicians (Assembléia Legislativa 2008). In 2009, one year before I moved to Batan with my family, to appear to decisively resolve this episode between the militia and journalists, Rio's special operations policing unit—Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais—"pacified" Batan, taking the favela back and creating the possibility for state governance. Batan, a small and remote community in Rio's West Zone, had gone from a site of age-old historical neglect to a witness of the state's vision of who must be protected and why.

Almost everyone I know in Batan has been harmed through this and other forms of racialized violent policing.⁶ When pacification forces arrived, people remained ambivalent or aloof, almost as though it didn't really matter who the men with guns were: no matter who they were, they still did the same things—confronted you, accosted you, got in your way, or did the same to someone you knew. For most the pacification force was understood through logics of state violence and imposition, another extension of how both historical and present conditions of harm defined their everyday lives, from poverty to injury to precarious work to lack of infrastructure like clean water, safe roads, and hospitals and clinics. These discussions of violence were always also discussions of racism. Denise Ferreira da Silva describes these "pacification" campaigns as military occupations, made possible through "kill on the spot" policing, military-grade helicopters shooting into the streets with automatic weapons, and armed vehicles patrolling streets, as happened in Batan. Da Silva argues that this "formulation of racial violence . . . captures the way in which raciality immediately justifies the state's decision to kill some people . . . in the name of self-preservation. These exterminations do not trigger an ethical crisis because the bodies of these people and the territories they inhabit almost always already signify violence" (2014, 69). As Jaime Alves (2014) puts it, writing on the way Black life is governed and rendered destructible, life in Brazil for Black people is imbued with an "ordinary" "anti-black terror," in which Blackness is read as a sickness of the individual and of space and named as disorder, authorizing the killing of Black life.⁷ Or as Christen A. Smith extends this self-preservation of the state through anti-Black violence: "The black body in pain" is part of the organization of Brazil. "Brazil's horizon of death erases the black body. . . . This is not to

say that blackness can truly be reduced to this state of death and invisibility, but rather that this is the political project of state terror” (2016, 175).

These suburbs, pacified or not, are entrenched with everyday reminders of terror’s proximity to themselves, their families, and their communities. They are often places of acute physical and social abandonment, made and enacted through this systemic anti-Blackness. In the height of the dry season, when the water supply is low, the city water company—a public-private partnership—shuts the taps here so others at the beach front can enjoy access without disruption. In other seasons floods caused by inadequate wastewater infrastructure regularly fill people’s homes with knee-high water. Infants die of preventable causes in crowded hospitals that offer only marginal prenatal care. This is a city, and a form of governance, premised on the disposability, capture, and dispossession of Black life (Vargas 2018).

Evangelicalism in Batán, and the *subúrbios* more broadly, cannot be separated from these violent whims of the state. We must situate Evangelicalism within this ongoing violence and consider how Evangelical belief and practice are ways of making sanctuary: spaces of respite from the ordinary operations of state abandonment and capture.⁸ The Evangelicalism that I describe in this book is widely believed to be knotted together with the rule of the former Far Right president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, whose presidency was buoyed by Evangelicals across Brazil. Yet the kinds of violent exclusion and harm that Bolsonaro lauded and incentivized, his efforts to borrow from Evangelicalism and its currents, both preceded him and will outlast him. His presidency should be seen as both violent and neofascist in organization. At the same time, his loss in the 2022 election should not be mistaken for the departure of cruelty.

This book grapples with the ways that popular Evangelicalism transcends electoral politics, linked to many Evangelicals’ exhaustion and mistrust with both the political Left and Right. This mistrust can resettle into hope, in part because Evangelicalism has come to offer up something of a departure from the misgivings that have long surrounded political rhetoric and inconsistent political action, even in the face of sprawling need. It can’t be denied that bombastic Evangelicals do tremendous harm through multiple forms of violence, including the persecution of LGBTQ individuals and communities, systemic racism, gender-based violence, and the

ongoing wage theft from people when they are at their most miserable and vulnerable. Bolsonaro capitalized on all of this, packaging his message in high-profile Evangelical pastors' promises, offering up a state project seemingly in God's grace and favor. The violence that came with his presidency (and after) is deplorable; as has been the violence of absent care, police massacres, and racial subordination through Brazil's history. I encourage readers to critically engage with this book's depiction of Evangelicalism as something that certainly emerges from violence and harm and also from individuals' and families' desperation for safety: a modicum of grace in the city.

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Clank.

Clank.

Clank.

Clank.

It's Ana again, putting together her cart. She tells me that she graciously holds out her arms to the angels and then sits neatly on the stoop so that they might more easily turn her limbs to metal, converting her body into a prayer, a blessing, a vessel.

The sounds rouse me each morning. The sharp metallic scraping and dinging of heavy metal bars being dragged, dropped, and forced together wakes everyone on this strip of the street: a 4:45 a.m. call to prayer. Soon the clanking is joined by the sounds of dogs, shuffling feet, televisions, and maybe the hum of the water pump—that is, if someone has neglected to fill the rooftop tank the evening before. A military plane suddenly rumbles a few hundred feet overhead. The morning smells begin to waft over too: sweet coffee, soapy laundry water, petrol fumes. These smells simmer on the hot pavement in the summer or in the dampness that clings to air, nostrils, and asbestos roof tiles in the rainy months.

Ana and her extended family—three adults and six children—live together on the ground floor of a self-built home. They have lived in Batan for many years. They all migrated from the port city of São Luís in the state of Maranhão, a comparatively tiny city, located in the far northeastern tip of the country. Many migrants to the western *subúrbios* come from