

I Only Know the Mosquito Bites: Religious Occupations and Contingent Relationships in São Paulo, Brazil

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In this text, I approach religion, as it is understood within the current “material turn” in Religious Studies (e.g., Bräunlein, Lanz), to understand how belief and faith are not only states of mind but also constitutive of the built environment. To that end, this essay also contributes to “writing the city,” a recent push among scholars across the disciplinary spectrum to move beyond conventional empiricism and connect experience with the material, imagination with politics, and literature with social science. Building on the work of Lefebvre and others (e.g., Arabindoo and Delory; Lanz; Simone), I search for an idiom that traverses disciplines of study and scales of experience. The transformations occurring in Brazilian cities *do* hold insights for those outside of Brazil and Latin America. Namely, the forces of migration, race, and religion create spatial incursions and narrative trajectories that are central to any understanding of the twenty-first century.

Based on fieldwork in a range of Haitian migrant communities in São Paulo, I argue that the production of the city depends on visibility and presence. The critical methodological question in this hybrid essay is: how can researchers and activists practice ways of bearing witness to the assemblage of urban spirituality as a migrant presence? In this way, I join scholars such as AbdouMaliq Simone, who famously posited “to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities in the city” (407), as well as Stephen Graham and Colin MacFarlane, who argue for an account of infrastructure as everyday experience. That infrastructure might be defined by human activity on a common, quotidian level is a significant addition to the material and spatial perspective this essay purports, because it allows for personal narrative as a spatial production. In a complementary manner, it also affords an appreciation of what Graham and MacFarlane describe as the question of “managing of” and “experimenting with” (3) infrastructure to maintain “normalcy” or

effect change. We have thus ventured significantly away from a rigid notion of the city and of infrastructure as cement encasings and inflexible conduits of human activity, and we embrace the idea of the urban as necessarily a fluid, dynamic, political, contested set of human–material relationships that depend on connections. Such “assemblages,” as they have come to be known via the scholarship of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, open up the city. They help us track visibility and assess the process of everyday infrastructure in the social life of cities.

These assemblages take many forms and all require narration to take hold and effectively become a spatial occupation. In this essay, I mix ethnography with my own fictional writing, informed by fieldwork in and near-by a popular evangelical church located in Guaianases in the Zona Leste of the city of São Paulo.¹ My choice of textual representation requires context. I borrow from many before me, such as anthropologists, like Paul Stoller, who, in his work with Songhay merchants moving back and forth in between Niger and the United States, opens certain doors for the art of ethnography. Writes Stoller, “This professional challenge, which I have been proud to undertake, has some representational limitations. The ethnographic writing style sometimes muffles the drama of social life as it is lived. This tendency pulls the reader away from the excitement and trauma of lived reality and limits the depth of characterization” (212). Essayist and poet Kevin Young provides another register with which to imagine ethnographic narrative as a “funky, vernacular *troof* that’s part proof and part story . . . I am interested in the ways black folks use fiction in its various forms to free themselves from the bounds of fact” (19).

Within the discipline of anthropology, one might trace this line of thought to Clifford Geertz, who famously quipped that ethnography is effectively *fiction*: “In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations . . . They are . . . fiction; fiction, in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’” (15). However, anthropologists—indeed, acclaimed ones including many of Boas’s disciples—embraced the genre of fiction during the 1920s and early 1930s (Langness and Frank). In effect, Geertz recuperates a sensibility to the text, and, thereafter, a cadre of humanist anthropologists developed this logic a step further to assert that ethnography is a textual genre and deserves critical attention as, indeed, literature.²

Ethnography, in the words of Kathleen Stewart, emerges “at the limit of what is possible to say” (228). It seems to me that this limit has something to do with a difference in parameters; that is to say, writing affords a realm of imagination, an allure that is unlike speech. The enticing promise of writing is importantly kept in check by the ethics of narration within the genre of ethnography, however loosely defined that genre may be. The poetics of

description and interpretation come up against the foundational element of what one might call the point of view.

Writing, as a material and formalized act of language, experiments with being in the world. As an author, I hope for “attunement” in myself (Felski), meaning an adaptation and convergence of thought and understanding, during the process of translating experiences and interpretation into prose. I also hope for attunement among readers who might imagine, in this case, the city as (constituted by) migrant presence.

Fiction, in this case a short story, contributes to an epistemology of migration and the urban because it conveys lived precarity and human emotion, the embodiment of the shared experience of uncertainty and interdependency among migrants and of the material structures of the city. Narration, if considered in such terms, constitutes an infrastructure that is a “platform for providing for and reproducing life in the city” (Simone 408). Storytelling is thus a practice of sharing personal experiences connected to urban material.

As Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean described in their introduction to the volume *Crumpled Paper Boat*, ethnographies share a function with modes of transport in that they “take us in and out of the field, put our interlocutors in motion, and allow our stories to travel from place to place on their own” (1). Writing exposes the “openness” of movement (4), a potential exposure to encounters, the existential site of knowledge, and, ultimately, transformation. Like many spiritual tales and migrant stories, mine foregrounds movement.³ A pilgrimage. Being lost. Looking for something. Becoming someone.

Haitian Migration and Religiosity in Brazil

Religion is one of the first material manifestations of refugees’, and most immigrants’, experiences when they arrive in São Paulo. Until recently, the only institution that openly received, gave shelter, and facilitated paperwork for immigrants was Missão Paz, which is part of the Parochial Nossa Senhora da Paz and member of the Scalibrini International Migration Network. Constructed in 1940 in the downtown area of Glicério, Missão Paz serves the large diasporic Italian community in São Paulo and, later, in the 1960s became the center of migration studies and bureaucratic infrastructure.

However, few immigrants these days are Catholic; most are evangelical Christians or Muslims. São Paulo’s faithscapes are diverse, and, as they navigate their way through bureaucracy related to employment, healthcare, commerce, and residency, many immigrants map out their religious comfort zones. The current moment is one in which thousands of immigrants are joining hundreds of thousands of Brazilians, who are positioned precariously as

underemployed and under-appreciated quasi-citizens. They often move to the sprawling peripheries and, as part of this process, they adjust their dreams and imaginaries to new social realities. This is not solely a psychological adaptation or a cultural integration per se but also a material production. Religion, understood as an institutional expression of spirituality, is a rich and insightful arena for understanding the intersection between ideology and materiality. In this case, I focus on how Haitian migrants “render the beyond” in material form, thereby transforming the city and themselves.

After the devastating earthquake in January 2010, scores of Haitians tried to pick up the pieces of their lives and sought out new destinations. As Handerson notes, there is a documented history of Haitian migration to Brazil since the 1940s, but the visibility of this migration was very limited until the 2010 earthquake. Another significant temporal marker in this history is 2004 and the leading role of Brazil among UN forces on the ground in Haiti, often referred to as MINUSTAH (*Missão das Nações Unidas para a Estabilização do Haiti*).⁴ On several occasions, Brazil’s presence in Haiti was cited to me during my fieldwork in São Paulo from 2016 to 2018 as a factor in Haitians’ decision-making process when they considered migration.⁵ Taken more generally, the scholarship about Haiti and Haitian lives foregrounds the role of migration in the socio-economic and political histories of Haiti. Haitians are used to migration and, as Handerson explains, the term *diaspora* in the Haitian Kreyol language is expansive in daily parlance, referring directly to houses, finances, and the Haitian people themselves.⁶

Between 2010 and 2017, approximately one-hundred thousand Haitians entered Brazil with roughly 20 percent, or twenty thousand, of these making their way to the city of São Paulo.⁷ Magalhães qualifies these statistics by affirming that the great majority of Haitian migrants (as well as other migrants) normally pass some period of time in São Paulo because it is the one city that has institutional infrastructure to receive immigrants. In addition, it is the main site for labor recruitment. In the case of Haitian migrancy, representatives from the poultry and construction industries have recruited thousands of Haitians for destinations in the Southern states of Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul. Such labor geographies support claims by Pachi and others that the intensification of contemporary migration, including Haitian, is a result of late capitalism and the pressures of labor in “flexible” or “mobile” economies (Sayad 1998).⁸ Moreover, one factor in the uptick in Haitian migration to Brazil and ultimately São Paulo is inextricably linked to the dynamic immigration policies and to corporate workarounds in the United States and France (Magalhães 2016).

The other side of the process of displacement is “emplacement,” which refers to making space into a meaningful place and which is an essential part

of migration and the more comprehensive term of *migrancy*. Akin to what Pereira, in her work with Haitian evangelical communities in Brazil, describes as “lugaridades,” emplacement is literally the act of making place and is as existential as it is material, as psychological as it is geographical. Religion plays a significant role in emplacement, and, like economics, the semiotics of religion, place (urban), and migration is a balance of imposed perceptions and local agency. For example, the general notion, buttressed by scholarship in folklore, ethnomusicology, and anthropology, is that Haitians are all practitioners of Vodum or Voodoo, one of many forms of African American (in the continental sense) spirituality, which features polytheism, spirit possession, and vibrant polyrhythmic musical/dance performances as part of ritual. The weight of what Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls the “archival power” has made it difficult to carve out a space for evangelical Haitians (Pereira).

Moreover, the role of institutional racism in the categorization of “refugee” and “humanitarian visa” has directly affected Haitians, as compared to Syrians and Colombians. The latter two national categories are read by the state and third-sector NGOs as “white” and “refugees,” while Haitians, and all African immigrants for that matter, are africanos or negros, who are, at best, potentially eligible for humanitarian visas.⁹ Anthropologists Igor Machado and Alexandra Almeida have demonstrated in their fieldwork in São Paulo that “legal status, nationality or language spoken by black foreigners are secondary to the primacy of skin color, which places them in the same position of exclusion of Afro-Brazilians” (Machado and Pardue 40). Ultimately, Haitian life chances are shaped by white privilege, as it is locally construed, which leads to a precaritization and peripherization of Haitian lives. In addition, such expressions of inequality as they relate to immigration policies have important historical precedents in Brazil (Lesser).

It is important to consider the role of agency in religious migration as a coping mechanism not only for displaced people but also for diasporic leaders (Pardue and Gibbings). For example, spiritual leaders may instigate migration, and, increasingly, they venture into areas in which their religion is not sanctioned by the state (Gemmeke). Spiritual agency is frequently transformational in nature. In his work on transnational Haitian Protestant faith communities in the Bahamas, Bertin Louis, Jr., discusses the role of transformation in devotees’ belief in self and identification as they make their way within local society.

The brief literature review above features a charismatic leader exploring the diaspora, a common laborer looking for community in a strange land, and border agents ill-equipped at managing difference. What links these characters are narratives that have spatial effects. In their discussion of Haitian

populations in the capital city of Porto Velho, which is located in the southern Amazon state of Rondônia in Brazil, Geraldo and Marília Cotinguiba argue that Porto Velho itself was invented as a “city” in the first decade of the twentieth century due to the construction and management of Estrada de Ferro Madeira Mamoré (EFMM), a regional railroad. The mythology surrounding the railroad has generated not only spatial patrimony but also historical roots. The authors use the relationship between story and space to link popular and consecrated urban history (e.g., the EFMM) to the “lie” that border agents told to the first wave of over fifty Haitian immigrants who crossed the border into the neighboring state of Acre in 2011, and then, ultimately, to urban production in Porto Velho. The story goes that a public servant in the border town of Brasiléia provided a phone number of a company in Porto Velho that did not, in fact, exist (Cotinguiba and Cotinguiba 263). From this lie, the production of a Haitian neighborhood took place as the immigrants materialized the conundrum into a new place. Put simply, the Haitian contingent did not have the means nor the incentive to return to Brasiléia, so they put down roots in Porto Velho.

These stories imply that Haitian involvement often has depended on a series of interactions with Brazilians. Interdependency, either planned or aleatory, occurs and results in spatial transformation. This suggests the larger theoretical insight that the urban is a product of encounters and, increasingly, encounters among significant differences (nation, ethnicity, language, religion, etc.). Moreover, it stands to reason that “the urban” is neither a product of mere “locality” nor a total transformation of the local into a fully diasporic hub. That is to say, it is not about the reproduction of authentic or autochthonous culture but about the production of a third space.

The following story explores the human encounter and the frame of contingency as fundamental to the materiality and spirituality of an Assembly of God (Assembleia de Deus) storefront church located in the Zona Leste of São Paulo. My exploration features ethnographic fiction, which in this case can be described as elaborating dialogues and social context from a series of empirical fieldwork events, to convey the shared experience of uncertainty and dependency among migrants and their structures of visibility.

I Only Know the Mosquito Bites

It threatened rain. It often did in the late afternoon at that time of year. I felt anxious and dehydrated, my body both resistant to and desiring water. I had been wandering the streets of the downtown, dilapidated neighborhood of Campos Eliséos, looking for Bertrand, a young man who I had seen change

and mature. I had heard disturbing news about his health and felt compelled to investigate. Despite all the differences between us, we were, at one time, relatively close. I think he would agree that we were friends.

As I stood at the corner of Rio Branco and Duque de Caxias Avenues, sketching out in my mind the possible places Bertrand might be, I saw Lauren out of the corner of my eye. She also looked anxious, waiting and looking down constantly at her cell phone. It had been a while, and I wondered if Lauren would even remember me. She would certainly know what was going on with Bertrand.

“Hey Lauren. *Lembra de mim?* We met a few years ago. I’m a friend of Bertrand and I am worried about him. I am worried about his family.”

Lauren paused momentarily to assess the situation, scanning my face for inconsistencies and looking me up and down, and seemingly around me, as if this could all be a practical joke. You know, a friend might send a weird, old white man, who is all desperate, to freak her out. There was silence. But, finally, Lauren registered me.

“Yes, yes, I remember you. Look, *I* am Bertrand’s closest family right now. *We* are in a relationship, ok. And, yes, I am also worried about him. For some time now, he just seems more than ill, like he’s really out of it. Like he is not connecting totally with people and places around him.” Lauren frowned, revealing a pair of shallow dimples, which struck me as adolescent and which contrasted with her professionally ironed blouse and generally adult outfit and demeanor.

In retrospect, I am fairly confident that Lauren was not particularly interested in exchanging family stories, but at the time I thought that I needed to show genuine vulnerability and connect with her emotion of feeling lost. I was convinced that her concern over Bertrand might be diminished if it were part of a universal or broader story of being “out of it.” Maybe I just told Lauren the story because I was projecting on her my own detachment. Maybe both were true. I had my opening, as Lauren appeared to be waiting, neither brushing me off nor ready to say anything else herself. I stuttered a bit, but then I began in earnest.

As senility encroached, my grandfather would take his car and roam the southern Alabama roadways for hours. Always the engineer, he occasionally referred to it as his “odd momentum.” Inevitably, at some point, he would realize that he was not in his living room anymore and begin to worry. He nervously checked his wallet and easily became distracted by past membership cards to the Masonic Lodge and the local

Golf and Country Club. He inspected his driver's license with intensity as he pondered the frayed edges of a grammar school photograph of me. His consciousness existed at the extremes, as he displayed an acute, myopic attention to either the minute details of the banal or the unanswerable dimension of existentialism. It was as if he could only see and judge the craftsmanship of a corner wall's right angle or pontificate on the contours of the city skyline or, more frequently, spout off about how the urban skyline overall had gone the way of the dodo bird.

As my grandfather reminisced over meeting proceedings and the lush carpets inside Miami hotel conference rooms, which were converted into teetotaling ballrooms and which were choreographed to the cautious jazz of Benny Goodman and the then-upstart clarinetist Pete Fountain, careening eighteen-wheel trucks whizzed by on the interstate, throwing a blanket of hot, dusty air over my lost grandfather. There was a swelling diapason of noise, wind, and heat and a crescendo to bewilderment. Again.

My family remained silent about these episodes, even when they became increasingly regular and placed my grandfather in danger. It was typical of my family to celebrate the superficially positive and innocuous and deny the curious borders of life and the wandering foolishness of humanity.

“That is a very American story,” Lauren said to me. “First-world family problems. Lost on a highway. Senility and family frustrations. I have my own stories of wandering kin, looking for answers in the wind, and of finding answers on the side of the road. But, now is not the time or place for that. I must visit Bertrand. He is sick and needs me. Look, why don't you meet us at the Guaianases train station at eleven on Sunday morning and we will take you to a place of sharing. A place where we can all find answers. A place we Haitians built in the middle of this Brazilian city.”

I was disappointed in her dismissal of my story. I was pouring my guts out, after all, about a man who had lost his mind. *My kin. My grandfather.* I thought my sharing had been valid and real. Maybe I should have described the empty look in his eyes there toward the end. Maybe I should have gone into his strong belief in the Boy Scouts as one of the greatest institutions he and his three sons had ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Maybe those things would have helped me convince her of that feeling I still get when I

see a caravan of big, corporate trucks barreling down a two-lane road. That universal feeling of being here and there simultaneously, an out of body experience, where you see yourself and time stops and real insight materializes. I would have sworn she wouldn't have reduced it to a "very American story."

Lauren had been suffering from insomnia and wicked nightmares when she was able to sleep. The 2010 earthquake had ripped her life into pieces. Her family's small house, her church, most of the neighborhood, all were in rubble. An act of God? To what end? Where was the sin that provoked such destruction? Who was responsible? Taking on the burden of trying to answer these unanswerable questions, Lauren, the sheltered teenager, went mute. She didn't speak for a month and, thereafter, only grunted and gestured as communication. Her aunt Janine nursed her back to a functional social health and, with the help of her husband and his diasporic connections through the church, they sent Lauren to São Paulo soon after New Year's and Independence Day of January 1, 2012. We met, that is to say, we were in the same room, seated in a circle around a table, sometime in 2014, but we didn't exchange words until a couple years later, after I had befriended Bertrand.

"Lauren, wait," I said. "I heard about Bertrand through mutual friends. Do you mind if I accompany you? Just for a minute. I want to check in and tell him that everyone in the *Casa* misses him. You know, it has been over a year since he moved out. I know he is still in the city center."

"It is nice of you to say that, I guess, but I don't really believe you. I know that Bertrand could care less about the *Casa* and that stinking neighborhood. Such a farce! It is so ridiculous that they would name it after the most magnificent avenue in the world, *Champs Élysées*. Ha! *Campos Eliseos*, what a cruel joke. You know when you look at an old man, who seems debonaire, charming, and wise. And, then, he turns toward you and grins opening his mouth for only you to see. And, there the truth is revealed, a mouth full of rotten teeth and decay confronts you. He laughs and you realize that all the while you have been pickpocketed, robbed of your money, and your belief in humanity. Those are your valuables, you get me? So, don't tell me about the *Casa* and his old buddies. They have you duped, my friend."

Again, taken aback, I stumbled to find a retort. What could I say to that other than it simply wasn't true? I opted against confrontation. "Lauren, I know you are upset. We all are. Look, let me pop my head in, say hi, give a smile, and I'll be out of there. I promise."

The *Casa* is an unofficial branch of the *Missão Paz*, which provides services to refugee and immigrant populations. The men and women who go through there are mostly Haitian, but there are also Colombians and Ango-

lans and, occasionally, Senegalese and Malians. The building is not part of the church's property but some of the more active social workers and clergy help broker rental agreements, vouch for any tardy rent, and generally keep the owner of the small rise building appeased. Senhor Sílvio is a slumlord, there is no denying that, and he wants his money, no doubt. But he also understands the situation. Mr. Sílvio knows that a registered address is a big step towards documentation, employment, a bank account, and a stable life. He maintains building security and does the minimum. Sílvio feels closer to God, and we exploit that. When I stop and look up at the Casa, I also feel closer to God. I suppose, when all is said and done, it's a win-win.

And, down deep, I did not fully trust Lauren. She was as sincere as it goes, I guess, simultaneously curious and disparaging of white people, which is fair enough. Lauren had arrived in São Paulo late in her teens, soon after the earthquake. In retrospect, we might say a convergence of things happened. A natural catastrophe, a growing personal and political radicalism, an urgency to find a partner, and a rollercoaster ride of Christian and Afro-Haitian faiths. Back and forth, an ever-increasing conundrum of how to fit religion and politics. And happiness? What about that? I ask myself, too. I catch myself judging.

Lauren is metisse, with a well-shaped afro. Her slight but sculpted build, smart specs, and overall appearance suggest relative privilege in Haiti, but, here in São Paulo, all of that had dissolved into a dime-a-dozen moreninha or neguinha in everyday parlance. After a brief stay in the center of the city, she quickly settled in the well-reputed, working-class area of Penha in the Zona Leste. She was around the downtown neighborhoods of Campos Eliseos and Glicério due to her involvement in USIH, the local Haitian immigrant association that offered social services as well as tried to maintain a bridge between Brazil and Haiti.

While Lauren identified with USIH and considered herself a justice warrior, she was relieved to go home at night, to return to the relative quiet of Penha. A place of real history. Traditional. A historic cathedral on the hill overlooked the endless peripheries. Lauren lived in walking distance to the metro, a luxury in São Paulo. We all have our paths, those that we choose and those in which we are placed. Lauren is a survivor when all is said and done.

"Religion is tricky," Lauren once said to me after a friendly meeting between members of Missão Paz and USIH. "I adore the rituals, and a strong pastor makes all the difference. But I know its ugly sides as well. I am still looking for the right place for me. Me and Bertrand."

Later she would affirm that, "I am a daughter of Liberation Theology in my country. Those young bishops of so many years ago were my guiding

light. My parents told me about a bold, vibrant Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who reminded the youth of that time, the elders of my time, of a slogan. ‘Legliz se nou tout; nou tout se Legliz’ (The church is all of us, all of us are the church).”¹⁰

“The church takes you places, doesn’t it, Lauren? I mean, I replay my life when I am sitting there. I jump forward. I think about the decisions I have made and where I was and where I’d like to be. You, too, right?”

“The church *is* a place, too. It is a place I want to be. I want to feel good about being there. Sometimes the church makes me feel part of São Paulo, part of the city. Other times it makes me drift off to Haiti or to the places my siblings are. Miami, the DR [Dominican Republic], south of France, or, I think now my brother is in French Guiana. Sometimes, I am nowhere other than that room, alone with God. He reaches out and I try to move. Most of the time I simply cannot move. I feel stuck, unable to take command.”

Lauren was sensitive when it came to religion and spirituality. She contradicted herself. We all do. The *Casa* was a sore spot.

I remember its inauguration. “This is the new *Casa*,” one priest boasted. But I had to agree with the local news reporter in their description of the building. Pale mauve was an unfortunate color for the *Casa*. As time passed and maintenance lingered, the building increasingly resembled the complexion of the ill. Black and brown skin that aches from malnourishment and desperation. The building and the people, according to Lauren, had turned a sick gray and belied the noble past of the structure and the surrounding district. The early entrepreneurs, who invested in the remote Jesuit outpost called São Paulo back in the latter part of the nineteenth century, made sure their homes were proper estates. The high ceilings and rococo features, both on the interior and exterior of the buildings, marked Brazilian urban modernity and placated the judgmental Europeans who constantly haunted Brazilian aristocrats. It was a hateful lust, a contagious disease of the “New World.”

Lauren understood that. She embodied it.

“The *Casa* is dirty. I blame Missão Paz. I blame the greedy refugees inside there. In the end, I blame myself.” Lauren confessed as much in a text. It was dated at 2AM, and, initially when I read it later that morning over coffee, I discarded it immediately as a wrong number or a misguided text intended for Bertrand or another friend. Or, it was simply one of those impulse texts that celebrities often send as publicity stunts or as embarrassing mistakes that, in the end, become themselves publicity stunts. I didn’t give it much heed.

It is certainly true that Lauren had grand plans for the *Casa*. She believed that refugees and immigrants needed more than just a bed and bureaucratic counselling. They need space for children to play and adults to congregate and have entertainment together. “Salão de festas” is the Portuguese term for it, but Lauren dreamed of a larger, less-standardized, open-air space for performances, workshops, and faith sessions. Her vision fell on deaf ears, to say the least.

“Irresponsible” and “unrealistic” were some of the more measured, diplomatic reactions from the *Casa* residents and administration. “How could you let someone take to the streets instead of using the space for more beds?” Bertrand was among the most vocal leaders of the backlash.

Born in Cap-Haitien, Bertrand also arrived in São Paulo as a late teenager full of energy. A brash aura surrounded his fiery core. Bertrand was tall, dark, and wore a baseball cap that featured a prominent “B” in hunter green. It conjured in me the city of Boston, the Celtics, perhaps an off-brand copy. The subject never really came up. Nevertheless, the cap shaded many of Bertrand’s features from general view, save his yellow-rimmed glasses. The cap helped protect him from scrutiny and the yellow, a patriotic touch, seemed to put Brazilians at ease. Of course, anyone could pass as Brazilian in São Paulo until one speaks. More to the point, Bertrand came off as a big nerd. But, in the *Casa*, people knew he could get riled up and would then use his height to intimidate.

The “B” cap only left Bertrand’s head inside the church, out of respect. Bertrand’s hair was cropped short, and the cap appeared to have no real effect on the overall shape, only leaving two faint curves etched into his scalp just above the ear. They were *faint* to me, but these grooves irked Lauren to no end. She never understood Bertrand’s attachment to the cap and took any opportunity she could to insert a little, funny, quirky compliment right before or after church service, initially in Missão Paz, then later in a corner dive in the Brás neighborhood not too far from the *Casa*, and, now apparently, out in Guaianases. “Your head really is round, Bertrand. I thought maybe it was flat the way you wear that hat so much.” Or, “you’re really a different person in the house of the Lord. I like what I see.”

The conflict over the *Casa*, while certainly a serious matter to both Bertrand and Lauren, was ultimately a mark of sparring and a spark of affection. Oddly, differing politics brought them together, and now, health challenged their relationship. Belief and buildings were once again the center of attention. I decided to hold off my visit to Bertrand until Sunday, when I would meet the two in the train station.

Sometimes there are moments of clarity during hysteria or when a fever or sickness is so acute. The excruciating pain can focus the individual on the

truth in the moment. Suffering can be a tool to reach a place of knowledge and community. Bertrand winced a smile as he registered the remarkably round face of Lauren. While her eyes searched for a sign of improvement in her boyfriend, Bertrand focused on the contrast between the direct, yellow light bulb dangling from the ceiling, its wires tangled and seized together, and the shadowy eclipse of Lauren's head, which was a protective shield from the necessary but harmful rays. Her frizzy hair cast off tiny sparks of energy and provoked Bertrand to speak:

"Baby, I once read a story about a leper colony."

"Oh, B, stop right there. Jesus cures the lepers. What? No need to go on, I know that story."

"Girl, let me finish. It's not about that. Listen. One of the protagonists had this theory and it goes something like this. *Wouldn't you rather suffer than feel discomfort?* Discomfort irritates our ego like a mosquito bite. We become aware of ourselves, the more uncomfortable we are, but suffering is quite a different matter. Sometimes I think that the search for suffering and the remembrance of suffering are the only means we have to put ourselves in touch with the whole human condition. With suffering we become part of the Christian myth.¹¹ Then the other guy promptly says, 'Then I wish you'd teach me how to suffer, I only know the mosquito bites.'"

Bertrand suffered from a complication related to his chronic asthma. He had been teased about it as a kid, even though many kids had asthma in Cap-Haitien at that time. But some learned how to hide their affliction better than others. Bertrand's father believed that his son was cursed, and Bertrand's mother believed that the ailment was a sign and burden for the whole family to bear.

"What are you doing, huh Lauren? What are *we* doing?" Bertrand closed his eyes and let the sickness deepen. "You go back and forth. Here and there. What are your dreams? Where do you want to be a year from now? Two years? Five? I am only interested in this bed, in this building, in this neighborhood."

"You are so silly, B." Lauren applied a cold compress to Bertrand's forehead and smoothed out the indentations around his temples. They had faded considerably, and Lauren smiled, pleased with her work as a healer. "We are here, surviving. Sometimes, I pay for my mobility, my back and forth, with loneliness. That is my mosquito bite. Right now, it is, anyway. I need you, B. We need you in the congregation. Out there in the Zona Leste. Out there in the community."

"My community is here, Lauren. My time in Brazil has been here."

"B, you teach me how to suffer, how to learn from and rise above the pain, and I will teach you how to ride the train out to Guaianases. Ha, I will buy you a treat. There's a leper who sells the best cocada. Don't worry, it's clean. He's Haitian, a grimmel from the countryside whose family lost everything in the

quake.¹² He always greets me and saves me a nice big dollop of my favorite coconut sweet.”

“Hmm, leper, huh? We’ll see about that.” Bertrand perked up and opened his eyes wide.

The couple laughed and embraced. Heat rose to Bertrand’s forehead as fever, passion, and consternation over the future converged within the young man. He struggled to transform his illness into a thoughtful space to reflect on love, belief, and residence in the mega-city.

The rolling hills of improvised housing spread out like a polyester blanket with a gaudy decorative pattern. A fluffy but effectively porous blanket also served as a winter rug. The suburban train lunged ahead full of passengers, as “ambulatory vendors” sold peanuts, chocolate, plastic cases for documents, and Tic Tacs. Lauren’s friend was unsurprisingly not on that particular train. A shot-in-a-million. In the end, Bertrand wanted to believe. I did, too.

After forty-five minutes of non-descript periphery landscape, filled with hazy browns and jumbled block lettering advertising mediocre services, the train pulled into Guaianases station, deep in the heart of the massive Zona Leste of São Paulo. Even on a late Sunday morning, the train was near capacity and the modest platform and sparse exit stairs quickly became jammed.

Bertrand and Lauren were waiting at the turnstiles. They both smiled, as if rehearsed. Lauren was wearing a light-red, collared, button-down blouse. It was freshly ironed, as were her baby-blue-colored slacks. They appeared to be made of some sort of hybrid between denim and cotton. No wrinkles could be found. The color scheme and her low-rise loafers communicated a proper informality for the occasion. Bertrand was wearing a new shirt, which was also, of course, dutifully ironed. With sharp, jet-black pants and a formal white shirt, he looked to me as if he were prepared for wedding vows rather than an ordinary Sunday church service. Maybe he would join the pastor on stage. Yet, I detected, rightfully or not, a certain discomfort lurking beneath his coached appearance. He looked better than he had earlier in the week, but he was certainly not at full strength. I admit I felt nervous and hoped that my relatively unkempt outfit of dark blue jeans and a faded yellow seersucker shirt wouldn’t put anyone off.

“Hey, Bertrand, new clothes, no? Special day?”

I wasn’t sure what to say and felt uneasy about the whole venture. Lauren had said something about sharing experiences and cultivating faith in ourselves and each other. She peppered her description with “community” and said that they would help me with the Kreyol so I could participate. My sense was that the proceedings and expectations were not just mysterious to me. I tried to think of something to say as we exited the train station.

“*She* bought these clothes for me,” Bertrand said as he quickened his pace and joined Lauren just ahead of me. They held hands and led the way.

The sun blazed a constant wall of heat, an energy like no other. I felt my body curve slightly as we made our way across an open sewer that was once classified as a river. We crossed an abandoned football pitch and headed uphill. Confronted with the symphonic sounds of jacked-up cars and stereo systems, we remained mostly silent, resolved to wait for an easier opportunity to chat. Passed a series of brightly colored yellow, green, and blue mercados and bars stood a brazenly white sobrado, a two-story building that appeared to be a residence of some sort. The garage was sealed by a metal, roll-down door, which was framed by spiked rods in a symmetric pattern.

Obviously a new construction, the building stood out even though all the material was commonplace enough, typical elements of the periferia. The side gate was slightly ajar, and we entered by climbing the steep stairs. Lauren turned to Bertrand and announced, “when I walk upstairs, I feel the power of God. When I come here, I remember pouring cement. Do you remember?”

The walls announced the identity of our destination, the Haitian Pentecostal Church and Assembly of God, a partnership highlighted, albeit in small print, off to the side.

Our timing was impeccable, as the pastor had just begun his sermon, one of many. He began with a retelling of the story of Abraham. Implicit in the pastor’s rendition was a focus on the idea of religion as a welcoming institution for migrants. Abraham, so the story goes, was a migrant, a stranger in search of fertile land, peace, and rest. The pastor paused for a moment, stared out into the heat of the day as it penetrated the worship room, and a fervor that melted the anti-theft bars on the windows. Then, he declared, “As the leader of a peregrination, Abraham epitomized movement as locomotion and as a coming together under a common cause. *Religiare* as *juntar*.¹³ To worship is literally to come together. And isn’t that the truth?”

The congregation responded in affirmation.

Pastor Patrick went on. “We come together in sickness and in health. Our Haiti is sick, but we are here in Brazil doing the work of God. We make ourselves right. We make our neighborhood and community right. We heal our neighbor. We come together.”

“But, how so?” interjected a young man who was seated on stage to the side of the pastor.

Pastor Patrick turned to the man and then pivoted back to his audience. He smiled and raised his right hand as if to receive a gift of wisdom from above. His white robe with red and blue sashes jostled ever so slightly as Patrick gathered himself. The crease on his forehead became more pronounced and his belly settled in place.

“We must pray. We must come to worship as much as possible. We come to this house of God that we built under his guidance. We heal as a community not as individuals. The Lord feeds us the sustenance of the Earth and Faith.”

Many in the congregation nodded. I also tilted my head as Lauren translated into Portuguese. She quickly returned to her upright position to focus on Patrick. She knew what was coming.

“I am a simple messenger. I am a conduit of the Lord. I take the energy of the sun and see it as a sign of God. I take the recent sickness of our brother Bertrand here today and take it as a sign of God. I share it with you, and we all become stronger. Together. Let us pray.”

A moment of solemnity prefaced an ecstatic barrage of drums, guitar, electric bass, and choral singing. Lauren and Bertrand knew all the words and I hummed along the best I could.

After the service, we waited around for an opportunity to exchange a word or two with the pastor.

Pastor Patrick appeared in a good mood as he held the attention of a group of women, who had gathered around him, finding a new source of energy in the rhetoric. The pastor explained, “I enjoy the sweat, in a way, Miss Geraldine. Just like I appreciate the cloth, the podium, and, of course, the feel of the Bible itself. The Word of God in my hands. In all our hands. I see brother Gerard holding the drum stick just so, fluid, providing the beat for us to feel together as one as we sing in service to the Lord.”

The technical talk of the work of the ministry soothed the pastor. Each problem had its solution in woven textile, glossy paper, or the hardness of wood and metal and cement. The affect of close quarters, the heat of belief, the cool floor tiles, the constant fanning from women rocking their babies back and forth. Shooing mosquitos away in vain.¹⁴

We continued to wait for a moment of the pastor’s time.

We settled for Grace, the pastor’s sister and biggest cheerleader. She recalled to us, “Sometimes the weather here and the close confines remind me of our church back in Cap-Haitien. We are small; the church is big. It takes us all in. The church is global like that.”

Lauren nodded as Bertrand and I looked down at our shoes.

Patrick, who couldn’t possibly have been paying attention to our conversation with his sister, magically picked up the line of thought and continued. “On earth, nothing is perfect. We can only find perfection in the word of God. And while this is certainly true, we make what we can out of the material that is around us. We are here in Jardim Lucia, Guaianases, Cap-Haitien, the outskirts of Montreal, Paris, and Cayenne. This church is a testament to that. We are the witnesses.”

With a smooth, practiced gesture, the pastor pivoted passed us and engaged a future family. Wedding plans were the topic, and the pastor was all ears. I glanced down and wished my shoes would disintegrate so that I could fall into the cool, white ceramic tiles of the hall and relieve the prickly discomfort. Lauren took Bertrand's hand, and they held each other tight by sight. A cure was taking place, and future plans were being made. I took my cue and exited the hall. As I descended the steep staircase, I spread my right hand across the cement wall and remembered my grandfather. I wandered home, kissed my son on the forehead, and stirred in my sleep.

Concluding Remarks

The intimacy of place, that is, materiality, meets the promise and the training of spiritual expansion. As implied above, this is a comfortable fit in the current milieu of the urban peripheries in Brazil, as the district of Guaianases has become one of the main points of destination for Haitian and Congolese migrants after an initial period in the center of the city. Their construction and repurposing of the landscapes of the periphery into spaces of evangelical worship is recognized as a kind of integration. The religious infrastructure of the city is part of a series of dynamic experiences involving comparative memories with other structures and sentiments, banal design choices that fit into or create distinction in the social landscape, modes of urban mobility and ritualized occupations. Lauren's reflections are an instructive reminder. "When I walk upstairs, I feel the power of God. When I come here, I remember pouring cement. Do you remember?"

Devotees are inspired to have out-of-body experiences or out-of-São-Paulo experiences. One's worldly sins and problems and stigmas are left at the door. The everyday realities of the city are downplayed for a chance at universal uplift. On the surface, it is an ideal evangelical experience. The ideal and material. Belief and geography.

In his work on Ghanaian migrants in London, Amsterdam, and the Hague, Dutch anthropologist Rijk van Dijk makes the important point that global cities are not necessarily "global" in an integrated, evenly distributed fashion. He warns that we must avoid falling into a pat, "methodological urbanism" in assuming such relationships. Moreover, he has demonstrated through his fieldwork with transnational Pentecostal church networks that local migrants see themselves and the religious institutions in which they exercise membership as global in ways that often circumvent the typical, downtown, big city hub spaces. In the Hague, global "hot spots" are often connected to Kumasi, Ghana, rather than an assumed Amsterdam-Accra

connection. In the case of Haiti, the centers of Protestantism, or what is glossed in Brazilian Portuguese as *evangélico*, were not historically Port-au-Prince but provincial centers like Cap-Haitien and Gonaïves (Pereira 161). With that said, the “uneven” distribution of globalized, evangelical Christianity among secondary cities does not preclude hierarchy and stigma, even intra-urban ones. As we can glean from Lauren and her reflections on competing worship places and belief, the urban as a faithscape is part of an ongoing negotiation of spatial and spiritual judgments.

In the case of São Paulo and Brazil, the incursions of evangelical churches and embodied identification have an established history in the peripheral neighborhoods of Brazil’s cities. Until recently, network building was focused on primarily the United States, with branches throughout Latin America. Regarding Catholicism, the paradigmatic connection was Rome, the Vatican City, and downtown São Paulo via institutions such as *Missão Paz*.

The increasing presence of local actors from Haiti and Francophone Africa has enriched the Christian and Islamic landscapes, especially in São Paulo, which is the primary destination of migration. However, it is too early to say how the connections between Cap-Haitien and Guaianases will develop. At the moment, they are more imaginary and anecdotal, which, of course, does not mean that they are any less real. However, they are, from a sociological perspective, more discursive than structural. I found little evidence of visiting pastors, which is more common in certain Senegalese communities in Porto Alegre and in small cities in Santa Catarina, for example.

Perhaps the anecdotal nature of current global feelings among devotees led me to employ fiction as a method of fieldwork representation. Perhaps the emotional density of suffering, faith, and love led me to choose the idiom of fiction. More importantly, I think, ethnographically informed fiction provides a rich genre to explore sentiments of belonging and the spatial imaginaries of belief. In his work in South Africa, AbdouMaliq Simone points to the materiality of “preparedness” among residents as constitutive of Johannesburg. In São Paulo, this kind of infrastructure translates perhaps as “belief.” To survive as a Black migrant in São Paulo requires a formidable belief. Lauren discovers, through reflection on traumatic memories and her conflicted relationship with Bertrand, that belief is necessarily social. Her disgust and anxiety directed toward the Casa suggests violence, and, in the end, she realizes that one cannot go it alone. Such urban faithscapes feature not only narratives of belief and frequently experiences of suffering but also material acts of emplacement and, thus, certain kinds of insertion into the everyday infrastructure of the city.

Notes

1. There exists an extensive literature on the rise of evangelical Christianity in the urban peripheries of Brazil. More pertinent to this article are the analytical texts regarding the cultural and spatial relationship between Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity, more generally, and the periphery. For example, both Burdick and Machado argue for a more robust role of the influence the periphery has on how evangelical religiosity is expressed, in their cases through gospel samba. Burdick also analyzes gospel rap and “black gospel.”
2. See, for example, Behar; Behar and Gordon; Clifford and Marcus; Hecht; Narayan; and Stoller.
3. In addition to fieldwork reflections, some of the narrative descriptions were inspired by reading Marchini and de Barros.
4. There is considerable debate regarding the efficacy and morality of MINUSTAH. For example, scholars and journalists have noted the rise of cholera and violence during Brazil’s military presence in Haiti from 2004 to 2017. See Silva. As it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic, see Melito and Sudré. In addition, Seguy’s PhD dissertation details the international occupation of Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and discusses the dubious role of Brazilian armed forces.
5. It should be noted that Haitian migrants also cited stereotypical aspects of Brazilian culture as well, such as Brazilian soccer and “racial democracy,” a national ideology that espouses Brazilian exceptionalism due to widespread racial mixing which separates Brazil’s expressions of inequality from race.
6. For more perspectives on Haitian diasporic practices, see the 2017 special issue of the journal *Temáticas*, titled *Dinâmicas migratórias haitianas no Brasil: Desafios e contribuições*.
7. These statistics come from Sistema Nacional de Cadastro e Registro de Estrangeiros (SINCRE).
8. See, for example, Sassen.
9. While humanitarian visa status affords certain benefits and allows Haitians to work legally and access the public healthcare system, there are significant differences. For example, educational certificates are more readily accepted from refugees than those with a visa, which obviously impacts labor insertion into society. See also Campos Silva’s dissertation.
10. Jean-Bertrand Aristide was the first democratically elected president of Haiti. He served as the national leader in brief stints in 1991 and 1994 and then later from 1996 to 2004. He was forced into exile and returned to Haiti in 2011. He published various texts, including “The Church in Haiti—Land of Resistance.”
11. This passage is based on a passage in Graham Greene’s novel *A Burnt-Out Case*.
12. A term for a light-skinned Haitian.

13. Religare or “juntar” (Baggio).
14. Partially quoted from Wallant (26).

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