

Book Review

– *Go with God: Political exhaustion and evangelical possibility in suburban Brazil*, by Laurie Denyer Willis, University of California Press, 2023

How do people maintain hope under conditions of violence and abandonment? In *Go with God*, anthropologist Laurie Denyer Willis gives us an important part of the answer by foregrounding how religious desires and sensations – a healing touch, an angelic smell – make the lived experiences of precarity bearable. Her focus lies on Evangelical believers in Batan, a community in the Northwest of Rio de Janeiro shaped by histories of government neglect and territorial disputes between drug traffickers, police, and paramilitary groups.

Throughout the book, Willis takes a feminist perspective that interrogates the gendered and racialized dynamics of this structural violence. As others before her have shown, racial violence has been central to the creation of the Brazilian nation-state and has produced a system in which black bodies are seen as disposable, dangerous, and unworthy of care (Alves, 2018). The systematic anti-Blackness is visible not only in the high number of deaths and disappearances in predominantly black neighbourhoods but also in the lack of investment in public infrastructure such as hospitals and transportation facilities in these neighbourhoods. Willis particularly highlights how these different forms of racial violence affect the lives of black mothers, who are often the primary caretakers within Brazilian families yet who are also consistently denied care.

The book's main strength is Willis' attention to the material-affective dimensions of religious experience. Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed, Willis develops a reading of Evangelicals' experiences and desires as "graceful elaborations" (p. 11). Graceful is the term believers use to describe feelings of beauty, joy, hope, and worthiness that may occur during prayer circles or when fulfilling small, everyday tasks. As Willis notes, these feelings are not permanent but come and go in waves, "like a good perfume or a stench" (p. 12). But in the context of racialized and gendered violence, abuse, and pain, fleeting moments of grace, wherever these may be found, are extremely powerful.

The author beautifully captures this fleeting nature in her writing. The ethnographic illustrations woven throughout the different chapters are written in a

narrative and attentive style that breathes movement into the text and alerts readers to their own sensorial experiences, particularly those readers who might be familiar with the smells, sounds, and sights of the *subúrbio*. Willis invites her audience to consider how the people in Batan experience pain, sorrow, hope, joy, and anger in all their complexity. To accomplish this, Willis also writes herself into the ethnography and continuously reflects on her own emotions, dreams, and desires.

Willis' attention to the positive, if fleeting, effects generated through worship makes two important contributions to ongoing discussions about the popularity of Evangelical Christianity in Brazil and beyond. First, scholars have often approached Evangelical Christianity (and Pentecostalism in particular) through a rather instrumental lens and have interpreted Evangelical conversion as a socio-economic strategy aimed at survival. While certainly valuable, these works offer little insight into how religious practices are felt within the body and how these bodily sensations in turn allow for a reconfiguration or re-imagination of social and political life. *Go With God*, on the other hand, foregrounds personal experiences and sensations and emphasizes the political potential of the search for grace, in particular, how graceful experiences allow for a different imagination of the city as a space where black lives are valued and cared for. This reaffirmation of life, Willis argues, is not only focused on socio-economic survival but involves a radical reappraisal of self and community.

At the same time, the author also acknowledges how Evangelical communities have been used and manipulated by right-wing politicians and pastors to secure votes and money for conservative and repressive projects. Jair Bolsonaro's presidency has attracted international attention for his outright support of Evangelical administrators and important research has been done on the societal impact of this religious-political configuration (Hutta, 2021; Salem, 2024). Willis' book reminds us, however, that the popularity of Evangelical belief cannot be reduced to electoral politics and capital alone but is tied to a lack of trust in the political system as a whole, both on the left and right. For believers, going with God offers an opportunity to think of politics otherwise and to imagine spaces and communities that cannot be fully captured by the logic of state or non-state armed groups.

Willis' point indirectly also raises questions about how other Christian-inspired and syncretic movements popular in Rio (notably Umbanda) have responded to the lack of trust in political parties and the uncertainty and unpredictability of life in the urban periphery. Whereas Evangelicals only believe in the power of God and consider the worshipping of popular saints and spirits as blasphemous and even dangerous, it would be interesting to examine whether the devotion to these saints and spirits creates a similar potential to uplift and reaffirm the value of black and marginalized lives. My research on Umbanda practitioners suggests that it does. Moreover, these practitioners also noted that the hostility of a part of the Evangelical community towards Afro-Christian and syncretic religious movements contributed to the marginalization and stigmatization

of the Afro-Brazilian community. Whether Willis has not directly encountered such hostilities or has chosen not to make them explicit is unclear.

For readers interested in urban anthropology, *Go with God* includes a reflection on cities as sites of experimentation and possibility. Even if Rio's suburbs are produced through a politics of relegation and neglect, generating spaces where "waste" can be hidden away from the eyes of tourists and upper-class residents, the suburbs are also experienced as spaces where waste can be repurposed in new ways. This experimental aspect materializes in the perfume-turned-divine disinfectant that Ana sells in Batan, for example. An understanding of the *subúrbio* as productive of creative expressions of resilience further extends the discussion on socio-spatial inequalities in urban Brazil beyond common dichotomies and sheds light on a part of the city that has received considerably less scholarly attention than neighbourhoods in the South of Rio de Janeiro.

In the conclusion, Willis describes the book as resembling a "tunnel of feeling" (p. 112): a patchy work that reveals hopes, desires, and anxieties but bypasses other ways of knowing, telling, and understanding. She is probably right, for all academic work is impartial. But she certainly got the "feeling" part right, and that in itself makes her book a very evocative and insightful read.

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References

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