

## “IT SMELLS LIKE A THOUSAND ANGELS MARCHING”: The Salvific Sensorium in Rio de Janeiro’s Western *Subúrbios*

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The density of the fragrance lands on our lips. They curl. We smell it as we breathe, the odors lodging themselves in our nostril membranes, coating the delicate scroll-shaped bones that make up the human nose. Milene, a devout Pentecostal believer (*crente*), purrs a short prayer in response to the rising fumes. Half of Milene’s body disappears into a big blue fifty-five-gallon barrel of thick liquid fragrance. She draws a large scoop with a spouted jug she has cut from the bottom third of an old plastic bottle and then appears again. She pours the liquid gently through a funnel, also repurposed, down some green plastic tubing. The viscous, bright white substance seems to move rather idly down the tube, and at times Milene has to coax it by jiggling the hose or whispering it a little prayer of encouragement. The plastic tubing is feeding the fragrance into a reused two-liter soda bottle that we have already filled with one part water and one part bleach. The first steps—filling up the bottles with bleach and water—are easier, as bleach and water are cheap and plentiful. It’s the fragrance we don’t want to lose a drop of. Milene is careful and practiced in her movements and, this morning, we do not lose any of the fragrance in transfer. Its strong fumes swirl, burning my eyes and nose. The smell coats our tongues, where fragrance mingles with spit, so that we taste it.

We are tucked into a small workshop, only accessible via the kitchen, in Milene's self-constructed house in a small community in the western *subúrbios* of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.<sup>1</sup> We are making a fragrant disinfectant for household cleaning that Milene and her family sell in Pentecostal-owned shops in surrounding communities. With more than two hundred bottles of disinfectant at our feet and stacked as high as our waists, Milene speaks to the fragrance as if it were an embodied form. She speaks to it in a kind of gentle religious oratory, substantially more reticent than a typical Charismatic prayer. She coaxes it lightly, as you might speak to a small child in need of gentle encouragement. As the fragrance moves along, she exhales and whispers: "This is divine [*divino*]." Then Milene passes one end of the tube to me while pinching the other. In a quick move, she pops the lid on the top of the bottle and shakes the latter vigorously. Here, she agitates it all together: fragrance, bleach, water, prayer, breath.

We do not wear gloves as we bottle, and even a little bit of liquid on the skin burns. I ask Milene if she has ever thought of looking for different, more secure work, maybe work in the *centro*? "No," she responds sharply, giving me a strange look. She takes another deep breath of fragrance. "This fragrance is given by God," she says, "these things God sets in our path are divine. God is our cradle. This work is me in God's arms."

Milene's rebuke of my question and her defiant assertion that the liquid fragrance is a gift from God seems at odds with what she knows I already know about the fragrance. What we are mixing is a waste product taken from the factory of a well-known international fragrance and flavor company, with multiple billions of dollars in global sales annually, strategically placed in Rio's *subúrbios*. Milene's husband Enzo works the graveyard shift mixing perfume, and he occasionally and surreptitiously removes the discarded fragrance waste after his shift ends. If Enzo was slightly unsure about the arrangement, Milene knew straight away what he had uncovered. For when Milene smelled it, she was without doubt: it was *pedaços de graça*, pieces of grace. God's grace set in their path. A means to construct a future. It was also highly concentrated; one kilo of this fragrance would typically make about one hundred fifty-milliliter bottles of perfume, which means that the fifty-five gallons the couple has on hand (about two hundred kilos) could be used to make about twenty thousand bottles of perfume. Milene's fragrant disinfectant is highly sought after. It is a product that deftly moves through the *subúrbios*, desired by many: the waste flows outside the factory, is poured into bottles, and then reaches people's homes via tight-knit Pentecostal networks. It is perhaps not surprising that intimacy with God would occur here in the form

of a popular, fragrant cleaning disinfectant. Scent is not trivial in the *subúrbios*: this piece of Rio's map is often defined by its lack of cleanliness. Acute water shortages plague the neighborhoods, and they are without basic material infrastructures. Indeed, in Rio de Janeiro and other cities in Brazil, the term *subúrbio*, like *favela*, represents not just a deficiency of infrastructure and services but also references the black people who live in them. Historically, and still today, the larger society understands these communities as racially inferior. The people who live there are described as immoral and unclean in both character and body (DaMatta 1981, 1995; Goldstein 2003; Fischer 2004, 2008; Veloso 2010; Perry 2013; Roth-Gordon 2013; Alves 2014; McCann 2014; Araújo 2016; Smith 2016).

Based on almost three years of ethnographic research conducted in Rio de Janeiro's *subúrbios*, this article considers how the discarded comes to matter in Rio (see Millar 2014), and the ways in which Pentecostalism, margins, smells, and soaps are put to work to construct new kinds of affective space (O'Neill 2013). What enables something like repurposed waste to become "pieces of grace"—a divinely given fragrance—is the larger story of the spatial and racial politics and temporalities of the city itself (Vargas 2006, 2013; Alves 2014; Alves and Vargas 2017). I consider Rio's racialized urban landscape and how it is sensed, and made sense of, within the city's history and present.

To do so, I look to what I call the *salvific sensorium*. The salvific sensorium is a kind of sensed space and territory that exists by engaging the senses with a divine alterity that reconfigures worth and temporal binds. It is affectively generative, if fleetingly so: an ephemeral emancipation from spaces of denigration and oppression. Working from Lauren Berlant's (2011, 23) notion of optimism as a cluster of "attachments" that often winds up as cruelty in disguise, I suggest that the salvific sensorium is capacious enough to be open to both optimism and its cruelties. Nobody lies or tries to hide the ways that divine fragrance burns, or what its smell attempts to mask. Rather, the fragrance's burn is put to work to describe how the desire for the divine—and the reason behind that desire—is also rough and problematic. Maybe even toxic, like chemical runoff turned household soap.

I unpack all of this ethnographically. In the first section of this article I discuss the concept of the salvific sensorium by considering the linkages between sensory experience and affect, drawing on the work of feminist affect theory (Sedgwick 2003; Stewart 2007; Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011; O'Neill 2015). In the second section I think about the ways race and smell get intertwined, working from the basis that race constitutes a system of relations predicated on white

supremacy. Race, constructed and experienced in infinite ways, is at least partly linked to the sensorial constructions of people and places. The racialization of smell is both symbolic and material. This becomes obvious when we consider that whiteness in Rio is almost always rendered as sensorially neutral or blank. In the third section I show how the historical and present-day configurations of Rio's urban space, real estate, and infrastructure development systematically disenfranchise black Brazilian communities, producing a conception of the *subúrbios* as a repugnant periphery defined by dirty people and wasted space. In the final sections I consider the way in which the salvific sensorium rearranges the experience of the *subúrbios* themselves. I make the case for the salvific sensorium as a sensed space that matters. It is, I contend, a generative and affective space that affirms worth in a city designed and managed to denigrate black communities.

### AFFECTS, SENSORIA, SMELLS

An attention to the Pentecostal sensorium—to “cultures of sensation” (Brahinsky 2012, 216)—has emerged as an important point of departure for many anthropologists concerned with religious experience (Luhmann 2004; Luhmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010; Brahinsky 2012, 2013; de Witte 2013). A defining characteristic of Charismatic Pentecostal faith is the work and practice required to have a visceral, sensorially intense experience of the divine, and often of the Holy Spirit specifically. Tanya Luhmann's (2004, 2012) ethnographic work shows how Charismatic Pentecostals in the United States cultivate very specific bodily practices to invite and receive the Holy Spirit. She argues that sensing God seems to take a certain kind of talent and training to have the experience of “absorption,” a sensory experience of God's presence (see Luhmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010). Similarly, in the ethnographic work of Josh Brahinsky (2012, 217), the Pentecostal sensorium is described as “a contested realm that nurtures some practices and distinctions while starving, rejecting or desiccating others,” dependent on prudently cultivated and nurtured “body logics” that act as “portable sensory dynamics.” Particular sensorial experiences are privileged over others in a “politics of authentication” (de Witte 2013, 63), where the experience of God is often tested via perceived “tactile sensations.”

Here, though, I am not just interested in how sensory work and experience allow Pentecostals to have a connection to God, but in the affective space and emotional experience that a Pentecostal sensorium makes possible. I thus draw on the work of Kevin Lewis O'Neill (2013, 2015), whose research on Pentecostalism and religious piety in Guatemala offers an ethnographic account of the ways

in which religious experience becomes tied to the affective sensations experienced across bodies and spaces. O'Neill (2015, 209) unfolds how affect is a sensation making "legible a series of spaces that are not necessarily territorial but that are nonetheless deeply political." The production of affective space "prompts an interest in the politics of felt difference: between whiteness and the racialized other; between the saved and the sinner; between life and death . . . a politically charged spatial divide made legible through a visceral and deeply political kind of disgust" (O'Neill 2013, 1104).

This political and emotional condition of affect is important. Sara Ahmed (2010, 13) characterizes her approach as a "feminist cultural studies of emotion and affect." For Ahmed, along with Eve Sedgwick (2003), Kathleen Stewart (2007), and Lauren Berlant (2011), feelings and emotions direct bodies through the world. Affects, then, organize how bodies navigate and move. In a feminist conception of affect, the latter cannot be undone from emotion, because as Ahmed (2004, 39) writes, "this analytic distinction between affect and emotion risks cutting emotions off from the lived experiences of being and having a body."

Stewart's (2007) *Ordinary Affects* picks up on this emotionally charged and sensorially rich way that bodies move within and encounter the world. Building from Berlant's notion of optimistic attachments, Stewart (2010, 339, 340) suggests that these affective attachments suffuse and constitute "worldings," or what she calls the "bloom space." For Stewart, this bloom space is process across space: an affective saturation of the body in specific landscapes of power and history, or across bodies and worlds. In her words, "an allure and a threat that shows up in ordinary sensibilities of not knowing what compels, not being able to sit still, being exhausted, being left behind or being ahead of the curve, being in history, being in a predicament, being ready for something—anything—to happen, or orienting yourself to the goal of making sure that nothing (more) will happen" (Stewart 2010, 340). For both Stewart and Berlant, this magnetism is sensual. The body is sniffing, glaring, eavesdropping—moving through the world not as a contained subject, but as a feeling body that must move and attach itself through landscapes in which power surges and amuses itself across bodies. Here, the bloom space resembles the body reading the atmosphere in a room (Brennan 2004, 1), but *queered*, as Sara Ahmed (2010) explains. The atmosphere is not a unidirectional force that impedes the body. Rather, the body is always already something; it arrives "moody," and that moody body is then folded into spheres and regimes of possibility, the "messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds . . . how we are touched by what comes near" (Ahmed 2010, 40, 22).

Nicholas Shapiro's (2015) work linking toxicity, atmospheres, and affects is crucial here. Writing on the ways in which bodies are always entangled in their atmospheres and compelled into doing the first-order sensory work of encountering toxic landscapes, Shapiro (2015, 369) notes the specific entanglements of bodies and pollutants in "late industrial material ecologies," as well as the ways in which exposure is often not an emergency, but a slow-paced, mundane encounter with toxic leakages.

When Sara Ahmed writes about affect and "what comes near" she is speaking literally, too. As Shapiro (2015) notes, what comes near us is about the circulation of bodies and materials in spaces that are structured in particular ways. Milene lives and makes disinfectant in a *subúrbio* open to the leakages of industrial and late-liberal waste. As Sharad Chari (2017) writes, this is life amid toxicity, "a politics of dwelling in the detritus of racial capitalism, and a reaching for the poetry of the future" (see also Povinelli 2017; Shapiro and Kirksey 2017).

The salvific sensorium is a kind of atmosphere encountered through a cultivated collection of sensual processes. When Milene breathes in the aroma of divine fragrance and labors alongside God, she senses and then feels something different, something that sets her apart as chosen and worthy, confirming her attainment of the call-and-response relationship that many Pentecostals aim to have with God (see Robbins 2004a, 2004b).<sup>2</sup> The affective sensation of worthiness and security makes sense specifically because of the historical and racial histories that shape the *subúrbios* and define them as anything but worthy and secure. I use the term *sensorium* to get at this felt space of worth, rendered through affective attachments and what blooms in response to them. I use the concept of the salvific sensorium to tie these threads together partly because of its lightness and ephemeral quality, a bit like the smell of divine disinfectant. It is waftier than a world or worlding. The salvific sensorium is a form of sensed space that seems to balloon into existence via cultivated sensorial work. The salvific sensorium makes for a sensed emancipation from the spaces where many have been stuck and abandoned, even if that emancipation is deeply conditional. It is a saving—*salvific*—experience. When you are in it, you feel worthy, lifted above the fray of the visible world. Conversely, when it withers, deflates, or suddenly pops, you can feel lost, cold, and untouchable. While the urge to reside in God's arms is rooted in individual and collective histories of violence and governance by abandonment, the salvific sensorium is often strangely atemporal. By making divine disinfectant or doing something as simple as participating in a Charismatic prayer circle, believers explain that they are searching for the *whoosh*. This is a sense that is

often described by sighing deeply while making a whooshing noise as one's arms and shoulders relax and one's body tips forward, much like letting down a heavy load. Believers describe that bodily exhale and lightness as a stretch of time in which they are swept above the fray. Swept away from the historical and present conditions of violence that have defined them and their spaces.

But those who describe this experience are also keenly aware of its vulnerability. In my effort to give their descriptions form, I risk trying to hold still something essentially ephemeral in its composition. The salvific sensorium wafts, hardens, dissipates, and returns, dependent on a multitude of spatial sensations, distinctions, and tangible things like waste fragrance and recycled bottles. It is there and then not there. The feeling of lightness might linger for a moment, an evening, maybe even months, but the salvific sensorium is not firm. Rather, this sensorium—like a good perfume or the stench of feces—is in and out, very much there and then completely gone, simply a recollection until—*whoosh*—there it is back again, an emotional assault.

*Whoosh*, here is that feeling of being worthy.

*Whoosh*, here is that feeling of being desperately worthless again.

The salvific sensorium is a hopeful place, even if believers often experience hope as pain or shame for not achieving what is desired. Even if this sensorium is doggedly ephemeral, it brims with possibility. There is a growing body of work in anthropology today dubbed “the anthropology of the good” (Robbins 2013), which pays attention to how aspiration and striving matter (Rogers 2009, 32). Attention to this purported good is important, and an ongoing contention of mine in the present article. But understanding the good in Rio's western *subúrbios* requires attention to the material impact of racism and antiblack order (Sexton 2011) and the ways that they both construct and govern the good (see also Savell 2015). To think about the good under conditions of racism and oppression, I turn to critical race theory (Sexton 2011; Drabinski 2015; Sharpe 2016). John Drabinski (2015), for example, queries the place of affective optimism *inside* pessimism and abjection, and here I follow suit. The salvific sensorium is cultivated optimism. It feels good to feel worthy, and people go out of their way to find ways to feel like that again and again: to make a certain kind of atmosphere reappear, be it by going to church and participating in a demon-extraction service or by cleaning homes with a divinely scented disinfectant that blocks out denigrated scents.

Smell powerfully enables these affective, sensuous encounters. Here, as always, smell creeps into the spaces opened by emotional experience, personal

memories, social history, and imagination. As [Alain Corbin \(1986, 82\)](#) describes it in his social life of smell in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, “the power of odors to stir the affective memory . . . the violent confrontation of the past and present engendered by recognition of an odor, could produce an encounter that, far from abolishing temporality, made the ‘I’ feel its own history and disclose it to itself.” Smell, then, is about “transition” ([Howes 1991, 128](#)), both temporal and material. Smell conjures the liminal, communicating to us something often invisible. Smell opens up spaces that, as [Anna Tsing \(2015, 37\)](#) writes, are at the same time both “present” and “ineffable.” Indeed, “smells,” as [Shapiro \(2015, 374\)](#) claims, “are most pronounced at the crossing of thresholds.” For Milene and others who use divine disinfectant, these thresholds are multiple, material, sensed, and felt: center/suburban, black/white, saved/sinner, cradled/abandoned.

### SENSORIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF RACE

Monica, Milene’s neighbor, sits on her doorstep, angry. Monica, also Pentecostal, had gone to the south zone of Rio for the day to “audition” as a *faxineira*, a noncontract temporary day cleaner, in an elite, gated house. Even before I embrace her, the smell of her rich pomade—rubbed deep into her hair and skin—finds its way to my nose. Monica has slicked back her curly black hair into a tight bun and scented her clothes and body with a floral perfume. Monica sips her coffee, its sugary and bitter smell floating up from the cup. She tears up, saying that the woman “auditioning” her had been rude and cruel. After a morning of cleaning, she explains, she had taken a break to eat her lunch. When the woman who she was cleaning for found Monica sitting with her lunch in the house’s domestic quarters, she acted visibly nauseated and dramatically waved Monica out of the house like one might wave away a stench. She then berated Monica, insisting that Monica leave the house to eat her meals, not sit down anywhere in the woman’s home, and not bring her food into the woman’s kitchen. Monica explained to me that she was new to domestic work in Rio’s south zone, and therefore did not know all the ins and outs of what was expected. Still, this request had struck her as crazy. With nowhere to go during her lunch break—and not wanting to eat while walking the streets—Monica had just packed up her things and started back home without informing the woman or collecting her half-day of pay.

Monica’s experience, and the preparation she gave to her appearance, were typical of historical and enduring ideas about labor, morality, and fears of con-



tamination tied to good and bad smells in Rio de Janeiro. Building on the work of Ann Stoler, Jennifer Roth-Gordon (2013, 298) has examined how Brazilian racialized identities are made via a “sensory regime associated with whitening” (see also Jacobs 2009). In Brazil, notions of smell and race often work together in implicit and explicit ways. Indeed, Patricia de Santana Pinho (2010, 108) describes how the requirement to regulate “*o cheiro negro*”—which Roth-Gordon (2013, 298) translates as “black smell”—is an essential aspect of managing blackness in order to demonstrate “proper bodily discipline” (Roth-Gordon 2013, 298).

Brazil is not unique in this way. Smell, in fact, often delineates difference. As Constance Classen (1992) argues, smell is a particularly insidious way to catalogue the imposed boundaries of race, class, and morality. Or, as Martin Manalansan (2006, 44) writes, “the sense of smell is the basis for recognition and misrecognition . . . it provides an opportunity to affiliate, to belong as well as to disidentify and to ostracize.” Perceptions of smell, especially of smells that supposedly do not belong, work alongside conceptions of whiteness and blackness in stealthy ways. In a study on the U.S. antebellum South, for example, Bridget Heneghan (2003) argues that even among the wealthy, white skin alone was not a reliable marker of racial purity or whiteness. The fulcrum of whiteness instead lay in a laborious care of the body and its things, such as tea sets and whitewashed walls. These white things served as extensions of the white body, and their care garnered whiteness. In this way, race was not just about skin color, but a cultivated presentation of oneself and one’s things. People particularly guarded against the risk of encountering contaminating smells in this context. Heneghan (2003, 149) tracks how white slave owners wrote in contemporary periodicals about the best construction materials for housing slaves, arguing that framed timber was superior because logs absorbed the odor and the “stench and filth” (149) of slaves, who filled cracks in log construction with stinking “dirty rags, old shoes, coon skins, chicken feathers” (150). She also describes how Southern homes were kept pure—read *white*—by segregating the odors of cooking from the main house.

Smell, morality, and Christianity have long been linked. Milene and other Pentecostals follow in a long line of Christians concerned with the medium of fragrance and the way odor can betray the existence of sanctity, while malodor can betray the existence of hell and immorality (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994). In *The Color of Angels*, Classen (1998, 36) explores the pre-Enlightenment idea of the odor of sanctity, or “the notion that Christians who lived in a state of grace would be infused with the divine scent of the Holy Spirit—the breath of God.” Using perfumes to craft this kind of divinity, however, still inspired cir-

cumspection and anxiety. The early Christian Church considered perfumes a kind of “debauchery and idolatry” (Classen 1998, 44), and even the role of divine fragrance—the trustworthiness of smell itself—was suspect. Indeed, Classen (1998) describes deodorized modernity’s doubtfulness about smell more generally, with smell cast as an irrational sense compared to the supposed objectivity of sight (see also Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994). The distinction between Rio’s center and its *subúrbios* is not the sweet-smelling versus the foul-smelling; rather, it is that the *subúrbios* dare to smell at all. To smell is to be premodern, even hellish.

### **SUBURBAN SENSATIONS: Race, Smell, and Disorder in the Western *Subúrbios***

These ideas about scent are not long-lost eugenic policies in Rio. Instead, they have actively constructed and continue to haunt Rio’s *subúrbios*. The small community in the western *subúrbios* where Milene and Monica live sits just about forty kilometers from Rio’s downtown and south zone (the *centro* and the *zona sul*, respectively), which are built up along Rio’s famous coastline. The forty kilometers that separate the prestigious south from the west form a complex web of congested highways and overpasses dominated by self-constructed homes and public housing units built on Rio’s flatlands. These forty kilometers routinely take two to three hours to traverse, usually requiring at least three modes of transportation (bus, metro, and a van that must pay levies to parastatal militias). A number of mountain ranges divide the west zone of Rio, and what I demarcate for this article as the western *subúrbios* is the area located around the former industrial pole of Bangu. This framing differentiates the western *subúrbios* from the well-known City of God (*Cidade de Deus*) favela, as well as from the elite Barra de Tijuca. While both of the former are formally part of the west zone of Rio, no one thinks of them when using the word *subúrbios*. Since the early 1990s and the onset of Brazil’s neoliberal ordering (Biehl 2005; Robb Larkins 2015), a boom in Pentecostalism has taken place in Rio’s western *subúrbios*, a boom instigated by a history of abandonment and the ongoing violence of the Brazilian state’s selective presence and absence in community members’ lives (see Biehl 2005).

As Roberto DaMatta (1995, 19) clarifies: “In sharp contrast to the American urban experience, suburban dwellers are not the well-off in search of bucolic contact with nature but rather the poor who still lack basic material services.” In Latin American cities, the centers were typically highly valued as colonial strongholds, while laborers were forced into the outskirts or onto devalued landscapes,

following a model of urban development that is often explained via the spatial metaphor of a teacup and a saucer. Rio diverges distinctly. The city's long history of slave-based urban migration, different from the oft-cited urbanization movement that began in the second half of the twentieth century, created favelas in the downtown core of Rio (Fischer 2008). These are communities built into hillsides, abutting wealthy homes and developments, widely characterized by their so-called informality (Roy 2009) and critiqued as sites of squalor. When the mid-twentieth century's mass urbanization did begin, many Afro-Brazilian migrants moved to these already established communities, creating in Rio a distinct and highly visible pattern of inequitable urban architecture that dominates the landscape. Brazil's dictatorship periods led to mass eradication and displacement efforts, which saw many of these historically black communities displaced from centrally located favelas and relocated to poorly constructed housing blocks or plots in the *subúrbios* (Leeds 1977; McCann 2014, 12).

This narrative of the development of the *subúrbios*, as a place of the displaced, is a common one. But both Brodwyn Fischer (2008) and Bryan McCann (2014) relate how the spatial formations of Rio's *subúrbios*, which are often characterized as informal sprawl, have actually emerged from calculated state practices of land subdivision and the placement of state-run (and then abandoned) public housing. McCann (2014) explains that as the first and second waves of industrial development rolled forward in Rio, the northern and western parts of the city saw these self-constructed communities expand in step. He argues convincingly that the emergence (and endurance) of informal communities occurs largely because of the desire for them on both sides: the urban poor, often black migrants from the country's northeast, needed places to live, while the wealthy required supplies of cheap and local labor. Fischer (2008) and McCann (2014) have both documented how, in the late nineteenth century, Rio's factory workers were often allowed to build their homes behind factories, which was "a solution that guaranteed their employers a local workforce while suppressing wages" (McCann 2014, 22). Semipublic institutions such as hospitals and utility providers often did the same (Fischer 2008). This practice of building on factory land (or very close by) formed part of the informal and underregulated real-estate and land-title market that overwhelmingly disfavored black Brazilians. McCann (2014) furthermore explains how, starting in the 1950s and into the 1980s, as populations increased in these parts of the city, irregular subdivisions (*loteamentos*) and self-constructed communities grew as developers bought up land in the expanding areas of the city, divided the lots, and then sold them to families who built their

homes there. These land developers themselves had only semilegal ownership of the lots, and they rarely registered the subdivided pieces of land with the state or municipality. This meant that families did not have formalized property titles, making them beholden to clientelistic local politicians. Similarly, families that had built homes near factories under an arrangement of informal exchange and beneficence found, starting in the 1980s, that they had no formal legal rights to the land that they had called home for more than fifty years (McCann 2014, 22–32).

Infrastructure in the western *subúrbios* was and still is an afterthought. In the 1960s and 1970s, springing up around these *loteamentos* and self-constructed communities were new public housing (*conjunto*) projects that dotted the landscape with their characteristic style of tall, multistoried cement structures with limited water, sewage, and electric infrastructure. McCann (2014) explains how the families and individuals who were forced into these projects after eviction from centrally located favelas received nontransferable land titles, obligating them to make monthly mortgage payments. Yet these supposedly nontransferable apartments quickly became part of the local informal real-estate market. New owners—in many cases, migrants from the northeast of the country with direct links to other migrants in the north and west of the city—did not make the mortgage payments, had no real land-title rights, and were therefore unable to demand that the state maintain its infrastructure promises. Other new migrants then built up their homes between and around these *conjuntos*, linking into the unfinished infrastructure (McCann 2014, 31–32). Black migrants found themselves owning and building property where almost no infrastructure existed, but also unable to effectively demand rights to water, sanitation systems, and electricity.

In this way, the *subúrbios* were literally made to stink. Yet the stench gets assigned as a characteristic of both the *subúrbios* as space and their individual inhabitants as people. Indeed, Monica was made to wear this narrative of the dirty *subúrbios* as an individual. Monica, knowing what she was up against, had presented herself as someone with a “good appearance” by slicking back her hair and wearing a beautiful perfume to signal worth. But the prospective employer deemed Monica a contaminating figure: her food was too smelly to be eaten in the employer’s house and Monica not worthy enough to sit on her furniture.

This shows that these *subúrbio*-making projects still operate today (Vargas 2006, 2013),<sup>3</sup> akin to what Roth-Gordon (2013, 297) terms the “soft eugenics” that linger and discipline bodies in Rio. Alexander Edmonds’s (2010, 161) ethnographic work on plastic surgery in Rio examines the ways that skin lighteners, hair straighteners, and cosmetic surgery offer an “alleviation of African traits,” as

though blackness constituted a kind of public health crisis: a sickness of space and the individual. Indeed, we can see these historical public health and urban planning projects as aimed at *alleviating* the blight of blackness and its accompanying smells, flavors, and presentations from the south zone of Rio.

### ON ANXIETIES AND HOPES

It is a hot morning and the sun is relentless. February is nearing its end; carnival was over two weeks ago. Most of the revelry that has carried us this far through the summer weather, when temperatures reach nearly 50°C, is gone. It is now just a long trek until the hot weather begins to dissipate into the rains of March. The air is not humid; instead, a moistureless wind is caught in the valley, caused by moist air being pushed up from the Atlantic over the mountain pass that separates the western *subúrbios* from the ocean. For this reason, this and surrounding communities are the hottest spots in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Most days, the temperature in the *subúrbios* is ten to fifteen degrees hotter than on the coast. The dry heat quickly evaporates the water in people's large rooftop storage containers, so that the unreliable water pumps—built from scraps and ingenuity—need to run more and more often to transport water up to the rooftops from the pipes at street level, often breaking under the strain of this work. Today, aridity and heat seem all the more unbearable because there is no water to pump. The pipes are empty. It is our third day without running water, and the reserve rooftop storage containers now sit empty too.

From my window, I shout to Milene to wait for me as I see her and her daughter walking down the street. She is carrying two empty ten-liter water jugs in her hands. I rush down our stairs grabbing two jugs of my own. We join a procession of women walking to the community's public water spigot (*bico de agua*), a pipe that juts up from the ground and then twists down so that people can fill a container from it. There is a black plastic faucet, and the water comes out of a neatly shorn bit of pipe. Women are walking back up the slight incline in the street with their water. I share a smile with the women I know, while Milene wears a grimace of determination, and sends a happy *bom dia, vai com Deus* to all who pass.

This morning, the newspaper *O Dia* ran a news bulletin online, reporting that an electricity interruption at the Guandu Water Treatment Plant would "harm" water supply in central Rio and the Baixada Fluminense of greater Rio, but that water was expected to be back to normal in seventy-two hours. In the meantime, residents of Rio were asked to avoid wasting the precious fluid. The

bulletin seemed perfunctory, hardly five hundred words, buried amid more newsworthy stories. I telephoned multiple friends in wealthy city-center neighborhoods to ask if they, too, were experiencing a water shortage. No one was. Clearly, water had been diverted to the center, while harm had been sent in the direction of the *subúrbios*. The city had solved the problems created by the interruptions in power supply by reallocating the supply and cutting water to the *subúrbios*, ensuring no one in the elite areas of the city felt an impact.

During this water stoppage, an intense smell began to emanate from the favelas in the western *subúrbios*. Without water to flush the self-built sewage systems, people's homes were being ravaged by the odor of sitting feces and urine. In my time living in the *subúrbios*, this was no uncommon experience; water stoppages happened at least twice a year during the hottest months. Milene's disinfectant proved, of course, a ready remedy to this situation. With its mixture of floral perfume and the scent of bleachy cleanliness, people could reclaim and disinfect their spaces from the intrusion—manifest in its absence—of the state. If the state was backing up toilets, making people go without showers and preventing clothes from being washed, then God, in fragrant disinfectant form, made a different kind of sensorium possible.

Milene asks me inside her house to show me what Enzo, her husband, has brought home. Now three fifty-five-gallon tubs of fragrance are packed into the workshop. As she pries back the lid, an immediately jarring scent emerges, musky and acidic, and my eyes sting with tears. She implores me to stick my head inside the tub and take a deep breath. "Do you smell that?" she asks excitedly. Milene dips her homemade scoop into the fragrance and then slowly pours out a steady stream of it, so I can take in its scent. She smiles widely and sticks her own head into the blue tub. She resurfaces laughing at the good fortune God has bestowed on them, saying: "It smells like a thousand angels marching, doesn't it?"

Milene asks me to pray and bottle with her. Her petite body fits nicely into this tiny workshop adjacent to her kitchen. She can duck and turn and not bump into anything. She knows the room's angles, its corners, its limits. She knows how to move her body in this room she built from the ground up. She is hardened and firm, unrelenting in the gaze she casts on her children and neighbors. The heat of the morning is turning into the unbearable heat of the afternoon, but we continue mixing disinfectant before we break for lunch. We sit at the table and Milene pulls shut the curtain door to the kitchen. The children are home from school for lunch, and she relishes the opportunity to shoo them all from the kitchen so we can talk. As we eat, I pepper Milene with questions about the

fragrance, wanting to ensure I have all my details right. But my questions seem to provoke an uncomfortable anxiety this afternoon. I ask her about the first time they took the fragrance, but while answering, Milene begins to cry: “Do you think we steal the fragrance?” She continues, not rhetorically, “Do you think that the fragrance doesn’t come from God?” I am at a loss for an appropriate answer, and Milene seems shaken and unsure in a way I have never seen her. I tell her that I have never thought of it as theft, but that I have a hard time knowing whether it comes from God. Milene tells me that a woman came by recently to show her some dark red marks resembling burns on a child’s legs that had developed after the woman had scrubbed her sofa with the disinfectant. Similar burns often marked Milene and her children’s skin after working with the fragrance. Did I think she was to blame for the child’s sores too?

Milene’s anxiety begins to channel into prayer. She pushes further, asking hard questions of me and herself: “Why do we take the fragrance at night then? Why do we take it in secret? Why hasn’t Enzo simply asked for it?” And then, “if it burns us, why not others?”

Her answer now takes the form of a Pentecostal sermon. She poses the hard questions to the nonbeliever, but is also slowly laying out pieces of God’s puzzle, leading and urging me to nod along, to learn to see things in the same way as her, so that by the end of the sermon we will have arrived together at a different outcome. She talks for a long time about this, circling around a number of uncertain scenarios: the company would certainly balk at their secondary use of the fragrance, she tells me. They think it is unsafe waste, and they barrel it up to dump it. Milene then counters herself, saying that they probably *could* ask for it. But, she warns, if the company could be convinced that it was not garbage, it would certainly demand payment. Or worse, if Enzo asked a supervisor, then it was almost certain that the supervisor would try to extort him by making him pay a bribe. Milene acknowledges that she has seen many burns from the disinfectant, holding out her own hands as proof. But isn’t this why people like it, she asks. Don’t they come for it *because* it burns?

At this point she starts to preach about the dangers of being beholden to anyone but family and God. We talk out some more scenarios, but eventually Milene circles back to this gift and the scent itself: “The fragrance must be a gift from God,” she says, “because God put the fragrance in our path. . . . I smelled it and I knew that we were saved. Smell it, and you will know. It smells like nothing else here,” she says while gesturing around her. She finishes, “We belong to God, not to this place.”

### MINING THE MARGINS AS PROSPERITY

Milene tends carefully to her gifts from God. When new batches of fragrance arrive, she calls me excitedly on the phone. She always carefully pries back the barrel lids, allowing me to put my head right in, so that I can appreciate a new scent and possibility. The actual fragrance and its accompanying scent matters; indeed, none of this would be possible without the *medium* of the captured waste fragrance. The media turn, [Matthew Engleke \(2010, 371\)](#) explains, occurred as anthropologists and scholars of religion began to conceive of religion “as mediation” (see also [Meyer and Moors 2005](#); [Klassen 2007](#); [Meyer 2008](#); [Morgan 2008](#)). They shifted their attention from debates over religious belief and practice ([Needham 1972](#); [Asad 1983, 1993](#); [Ruel 1997](#)), instead now attuning to the things that make belief possible, be they cassette tapes ([Hirschkind 2006](#)), veils ([Abu-Lughod 1986](#); [Mahmood 2001](#)), books ([Engelke 2007](#)), radio ([Schulz 2006](#)), or even dreams ([Mittermaier 2010](#)).

The salvific sensorium blooms as a possible alternative, even if an ephemeral one, pieced together via religious media in the form of discards. [Mary Douglas \(2002\)](#) has informed much work in the anthropology of waste. Dirt, for [Douglas \(2002, 44\)](#), is “matter of out of place,” much the same way that malodor is invoked as a disorder or a boundary violation. Dirt constructs and preserves notions of the self and the other, serving specific social, cultural, and political functions. But the actual waste or smell matters too. As [Joshua Reno \(2015, 558\)](#) elaborates, waste is “more than a symptom of culture . . . [it] is a material that has effects in the world, including local and global political disputes, liberal and illiberal forms of governance, competing assessments of economic and moral value, and concerns about environmental pollution and crisis.” Dirt is not just symbolic, then; it also moves and does things in the world. Neoliberal structures and post-colonial topographies often—at least initially—dictate waste’s circuits and its management, but waste seeps into places, creatively conjoining with the informality of the margins where trash becomes treasure. A central component in discard studies is the attention paid to people who perform waste labor and their creative work at turning waste or trash “into treasure” ([Millar 2008, 25](#); see also [Norris 2010](#)). In this way, Pentecostals are certainly waste laborers of a certain kind, but more than that, they trouble Douglas’s category of matter out of place. As others have documented, while waste laborers understand waste as potential, waste still seems to belong *somewhere*. And this somewhere is often not centers, but rather within “waste flows” ([Reno 2015, 564](#)) that seem to travel in rather predictable ways: from centers to peripheries, following global capitalist circuits.



Cruise ships dump their waste in Haiti and landfills are displaced from urban Toronto to postindustrial Michigan, for example. For Pentecostals in Rio's *subúrbios*, though, waste *is* in its place, for a different reason: it has been gifted and placed in Pentecostal pathways to prosperity. This labor gives value, but this value, as Kathleen Millar (2014, 34) points out, emerges from the painful paradox that precarious work actually *enables* people "to contend with insecurities in other dimensions of their lives." Pentecostals mining the margins for prosperity constitutes a form of optimism very much alert to harm in a city bent on pessimism toward them.

Milene is clearly not without anxiety about where the waste fragrance originates, how it gets to her, and the harms and effects it might inflict on those it touches. As Engelke (2010, 377) details, divine media can often cause apprehension about "whether a particular medium is a path to freedom or enslavement. Will this thing—this icon, this image, this book, this telephone, this computer—set me free or tie me down? Will it allow me to lead an authentic life (and in proper relation to the divine) or will it corrupt and cripple my ability to do so?" As Milene's sermon shows, she also struggled with these questions. Could this waste product be multiple things? A God-given material from which to craft their future? A forgivable act of theft? *And* a potential for bodily harm?

Pentecostals in Rio's western *subúrbios* often think of waste fragrance as a way that God, via divine gifts of grace, enters homes and lives and enables a different conception of life (Denyer Willis 2017; cf. Halvorson 2012). The salvific sensorium can unfurl, untethering life from structures of violence. But these moments in the salvific sensorium are always still tethered to everyday life. Fragrance runoff can be a divine fragrance only when considering the very specific way that stench, disorder, and disgust condition the access, flows, and circulations of harm. Water as a resource is rerouted to the center, while waste fragrance as a religious medium is routed through the *subúrbios* via specific formations of the urban and suburban that tie these factories, homes, and Pentecostal faith together. The salvific sensorium contains within it optimism and hope that perceptibly differ from the conditions of lives structured by the *subúrbios*.

The salvific sensorium, then, offers a way to immerse oneself in and engage with the world in a form of optimism linked to pessimism. Here, I am drawing on the work of Drabinski (2015), who reflects on the idea of utopia under a white gaze:

An Afro-optimism takes root in exactly this space: the space of tradition, the space of relationship, a space in which manners, rituals, folkways, dispute, identification, and all those other ways of creating a people that makes a future possible. This future is never anything like forgetful or utopian in the sense of a dreamscape disburdened of the past. In fact, quite the contrary, it is rooted in a tradition that expresses "the long and painful experience of a people."

In Brazil, as the excellent works of [John Burdick \(1993, 1998\)](#) have made clear, we cannot decouple black Pentecostalism from critical racial consciousness, or from forms of violence against black individuals and communities.

Residing in God's arms constitutes a distinct sensory experience that far exceeds the sensory constraints of the *subúrbios*. The salvific sensorium *whooshes* in, an affect of possibility. But the good and the hope it offers up is one linked firmly to pain. As [Drabinski \(2015\)](#) notes, "the vicissitudes of affect under regimes of anti-Black racism" are tied "not just to forms of resistance amidst the pessimist's story, but also to how forms of life live alongside, against, or even wholly outside the sorts of abjection" imposed on black life (and death). To view waste fragrance as part of the salvific sensorium means to open up the possibility of an existence of a beside ([Stevenson 2014](#)), an otherwise ([Povinelli 2011, 10](#)), or perhaps a fugitivity ([Sojoyner 2017](#)) from the *subúrbios*: a salvific sensorium haunted and burdened by past and present violence, but brimming with a sense of the possible.

## CONCLUSION

Chemical waste is made and discarded in the western *subúrbios*. It leaves the factory in a borrowed truck under the shelter of a blind eye. It is carefully crafted into a divine disinfectant in a piecemeal workshop next to a kitchen, then bottled in purchased trash from a trusted waste picker. Legs and a cart distribute it across a few communities, all with their own distinct forms of governance, and sell it on to local Pentecostal home businesses. Sometime thereafter, Pentecostals who frequent those businesses take a bottle from the shelf. They use it lovingly to cultivate a salvific sensorium, a space of worth and security in a part of the city historically and currently constructed by systems of antiblack practice.

This story seems to require creating an unbridgeable impasse between liquid fragrance as an object circulating within a precarious neoliberal landscape and liquid fragrance as divine gift. How can it possibly be both? In this article, I examine how this crafted optimism is tethered to histories and daily experiences

of racial inequity and inequality both sensed and felt, but also to a notion of a God who cradles above the fray without eclipsing the existence of the fray. Waste fragrance, then, is a kind of mediation of the divine that makes new affective experiences possible. To make sense of this, however, requires also interrogating “the link between institutional power and interpretive practice” (Rutherford 2006, 106), investigating how flows of power and empowerment, histories of harm and hope, come to haunt particular forms of mediation and their possible spaces: optimism alert to pessimism, wafting on the breeze.

### ABSTRACT

*Based on almost three years of ethnographic research living in Rio de Janeiro’s subúrbios, I consider how the senses comes to matter and how Pentecostalism, margins, smells, and soaps are put to work to construct new kinds of affective space. To do so, I track the way in which a fragrance composed of runoff waste from an international flavor and fragrance company has come to be understood as “pieces of grace,” or divinely given fragments of prosperity. I argue that the forms of racial and spatial governance that enable something like repurposed waste to become pieces of grace form part of a larger story of the sensorium of the subúrbios. In contending with Rio’s racialized urban landscape and how it is sensed and made sense of, I look to what I call the salvific sensorium, a kind of sensed space and territory that exists by engaging the senses with a divine alterity that reconfigures worth and temporality. It is affectively generative, if fleetingly so, and capacious enough to be open to both optimism and its cruelties. [senses; affect; race; value; Pentecostalism; Brazil]*

### NOTES

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1. All names are pseudonyms. I have also chosen not to name the particular *favela* communities where I or my interlocutors lived, instead referring to the region—the western *subúrbios*—as a general location throughout the article. The majority of the research took place throughout the western *subúrbios*, not just in one community.
2. Many studies of Pentecostalism draw attention to the ways that Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity can reshape the political, the social, and the economic, noting in particular

how neoliberalism haunts these religious transformations of self, society, and their relations (Robbins 2004a, 2004b; Bialecki 2009, 2017; Haynes 2012; Strhan 2015). In contrast, I tend to emphasize the way that sensation, emotion, and the political come together, but this account has been deeply shaped by scholars who take Pentecostalism and believers' desire for a relationship with God seriously and do not represent religion solely, as Naomi Haynes (2012, 125) puts it, "as a super-structural epiphenomenon moving over the solid base of capitalist hegemony."

3. On the link between urban space, place, and race more generally, see White 2012.

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