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# Introduction

## Pilgrims of the Potomac

MIGRANT FAITH IN THE SHADOWS

“YOU WERE ELECTED by God, chosen by God,” Rubém, a prominent church elder, insisted as he addressed a small group of Brazilian migrants on a cold winter night in December 2013. Pastor Jeferson and his wife, Juliana, the charismatic couple at the helm of this small Brazilian Pentecostal church outside of Washington, DC, were away traveling. In their absence, Rubém beseeched his co-congregants from the pulpit as peers, friends, *irmãos em Cristo* (brothers and sisters in Christ). In contrast to Pastor Jeferson’s commanding bravado, Rubém preached softly, addressing the ten or fifteen people before him as equals and intimates. Rather than speak from the pulpit, he walked amid the pews.

Rubém had known most of the men and women before him for years. He had worked and prayed alongside them. Several of those in attendance were his immediate family, including his wife, Neusa; two sons, Felipe and Frederico; daughters-in-law, Viviane and Luana; and two grandchildren, Daniel and Graça. At fifty-three years old, Rubém’s face was weathered and reddened from twelve-hour days working in outdoor construction. Yet, on this evening, he had traded his work clothes for a crisp suit and tie. His hair was neatly combed and parted.

Rubém had arrived in the United States in 1999, hoping to earn enough money to repay the serious financial debt he had accrued in Brazil. Saving money took longer than the six months he had anticipated, however, so he instructed his wife and young sons to join him temporarily in the United States. Unable to obtain visas, Neusa crossed the Mexican border with Felipe and Frederico, who at the time were twelve and nine years old. The couple’s eldest child, Vanessa, stayed behind to finish high school in the southern

Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, where she expected her parents and siblings to return within the year. When I met Neusa and Rubém in July 2013, however, fourteen years had elapsed since Rubém's arrival, and the family had yet to return to Brazil. During this time, Neusa and Rubém had lived and worked in the United States as undocumented migrants. They had raised their two sons in Montgomery County, thirty miles outside of Washington, DC. For fourteen years, they had not seen Vanessa.

Continuing his remarks on chosenness that evening, Rubém directed the group's attention to 1 Peter 2:9, reading, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His wonderful light."<sup>1</sup> Looking up, his eyes shone. "Maybe you feel small tonight," he continued, "and maybe you think that God has forgotten you. You ask yourself, 'Quem sou? Não sou nada!' (Who am I? I'm nothing!)." But when God elected you, Rubém explained, it was different from being elected by politicians who thought only of power and personal gain. God elected you for eternity. God chose the lowliest for greatness. God spoke to the poorest, the most vulnerable. "God chose *you* specifically for *this church*, and *this place*," Rubém asserted. He concluded his remarks by urging the migrants before him to serve God through their daily work. Cleaning homes, doing laundry, and cutting grass was holy, he insisted, when dedicated to God. In serving God, Rubém promised, each migrant believer ensured spiritual progress and forestalled "becoming stuck" in the United States.

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In October 2019, the Washington, DC-based think tank the Pew Forum released its findings concerning religion in the United States, entitled "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape." In light of new surveys and political polls, the article reassessed findings from 2007 and 2015 that were based on surveys with 35,000 individuals across all fifty states regarding religious belief, membership, and participation.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the earlier studies, researchers found that Christianity in the US had declined substantially over the five-year period from 2014 to 2019. While 78.4 percent of Americans identified as Christian in 2007, only 65 percent did so in 2018. Churches of all kinds continued to lose members, though mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations experienced the greatest declines in affiliation (from 51 percent to 43 percent,

and from 24 percent to 20 percent, respectively). In contrast, the category of “Religious Nones,” those who identified with no religious beliefs, had grown to a population of 30 million. The article painted a stark portrait of Christianity’s future in the US. With 40 percent of millennials identifying as unaffiliated, and more than 60 percent attending church only “seldom” or “never,” it pointed toward Christianity’s growing obsolescence, and the delayed fulfillment of the “secularization thesis” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The study, however, left out a crucial segment of the population: undocumented migrants like Rubém, his family, and his cobelievers. While one Pew study considered “immigration status” in its demographic categories, it did so only nominally, inquiring into how immigrant cohort, rather than legal status, impacted belief and belonging. It considered three statuses: “immigrant,” “first generation,” and “second generation,” and found that immigrants in general made up a growing proportion of all Christians in the US. Immigrants of all cohorts reported intense feelings of religiosity and commitment, with over 50 percent answering that they had certainty in the existence of God, that they prayed daily, and that religion was “very important” to them. If the study *had* accounted for undocumented migrants,<sup>4</sup> however, whom researchers consider to be overwhelmingly Christian and predominantly Latin American, the transformed “face” of US Christianity would be even more striking.<sup>5</sup>

What the Pew Forum’s study also failed to capture was the *kind* of Christianity undocumented migrants increasingly, and fervently, practiced. While most of the undocumented population in the United States comes from Latin America,<sup>6</sup> a historically Catholic region, increasing numbers of Latin American migrants have converted to evangelical Protestant churches while in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic and social scientific studies over the last two decades have substantiated this fact. Researchers have documented the explosion of charismatic churches catering to majority undocumented Latin American migrants in general, and Brazilians in particular.<sup>8</sup> The demographic shift in evangelical affiliation between 2007 and 2014 also reflects the growing appeal of evangelical Christianity among Latin Americans in the United States. While white adherents declined from 81 percent to 76 percent of the total population of evangelicals between 2007 and 2014, Latinx- or Latin American-identifying adherents grew from 7 percent to 11 percent.<sup>9</sup> What accounts for the growth of evangelical faith among Latin Americans in the United States, especially migrants without legal status?

As both exceptional and representative, Brazilian migrants constitute a fruitful case in the study of Latin American migration and religion. Studies of evangelical Christianity among Latin Americans have historically focused on the poor, and emphasized material rewards of evangelical belonging like jobs or wealth.<sup>10</sup> My research among Brazilian migrants, a comparatively better-off migrant population, instead highlights the centrality of *affective* motivations for conversion.<sup>11</sup> Brazilians overwhelmingly named loneliness, worry, and “feeling stuck,” rather than solely financial difficulty, as among their greatest hardships in the US, feelings they likely share with other Latin American migrants. Like their counterparts, most Brazilians in the US live amid increasing suburban sprawl, remain undocumented, occupy low-wage jobs in construction and domestic work, and come from Catholic contexts.<sup>12</sup> While underscoring the affective dimension of migration, this study also offers to reveal a portrait of migrant distress common across nationalities.

*In the Hands of God* examines the relationship between evangelical Christianity, migration, and affective experience in the United States through an in-depth ethnographic study of Brazilians living in Greater Washington, DC. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, this book considers the explosive rise of evangelical Christianity among migrants in the United States, and particularly for those from Latin America. While the fact of increasing evangelical religiosity among Latin American populations in the United States has been well documented, few studies have examined how their evangelical identity and practice shapes, and is shaped by, the migrant experience itself. *In the Hands of God* addresses this fundamental question: why do individuals become more devoutly evangelical as migrants in the United States, and how does this new identity shape both self-understanding and daily experience? How did Rubém’s invocation of age-old tropes of divine election and chosenness emerge from, and then transform, his own migrant experience in the United States?<sup>13</sup> And, how did evangelical belonging relieve the pervasive feeling of “stuckness” that he and so many other migrants I met repeatedly described?

My findings underscore how churches transformed what migrants *feel*. Affective experience, I argue, is key to understanding migrants’ turn toward intense religiosity, and their resulting evangelical commitment and evangelical-inspired activity. I show how conditions of migrant experience in the United States imprinted migrants’ bodies and minds with specific forms of affective distress. These conditions included family separation, geographic isolation, legal precariousness, workplace vulnerability, and deep uncertainty about the

future in both the United States and Brazil. Such conditions, and the feelings they inspired, triggered novel religious yearnings among the migrants I met. Migrant evangelical churches, I learned, deliberately articulated, managed, and reinterpreted negative feelings of distress into positive religious devotion. In doing so, these churches effectively relieved migrant distress.

I ground this broader argument in four main claims, substantiated throughout the book's five ethnographic chapters (chapters 2 through 6). First, I contend that migration itself configured a specific set of maladies marked by loneliness, depression, and the feeling of "being stuck," which triggered migrants' religious yearnings. These affective experiences, what I call an affective imprint of migrant distress, made migrants particularly receptive to evangelical forms of religiosity, divinity, and community. Regardless of religious affiliation, over 51 percent of migrant respondents in my survey study ( $n = 49$ ) answered that they had sought out God more intensely in the US than in Brazil. Forty-five percent answered that they had more frequent encounters with the Holy Spirit and felt God's presence more regularly. Seventy-eight formal interviews and innumerable informal conversations corroborated these findings, suggesting that migrants experienced an intensification of religious experience and commitment postmigration. Second, when compared to other religious groups serving Brazilian migrants, such as the Catholic Church or Spiritist centers, evangelical churches remained the most adept at addressing, managing, and assuaging migrant distress through what I call affective therapeutics—the deliberate attempt to "heal" migrants' psychological and bodily suffering by converting generalized affective distress into positive religious devotion.

Third, I assert that evangelical belonging not only made migrants feel better and more hopeful, but also motivated them to pragmatically pursue goods that would significantly improve their lives—what I call the goods of migration, including green cards, driver's licenses, better housing, and jobs. From the experience of feeling healed and partnered with God, migrant believers engaged in newly confident and hopeful activity in the secular realm. Fourth, I suggest that migrant experience in the United States leads to the broader evangelization of religious experience among US migrants more generally. Despite explicit critiques of evangelical Christianity among nonevangelical migrants, Catholic and Spiritist migrants revealed significant similarities in religious orientations, including intense intimacy with God and cobelievers, and increased susceptibility to spiritual phenomena. These findings point to a striking convergence of religious experience postmigration.

## Methodology

This project results from extensive fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2014 among several communities of Brazilian migrants in Greater Washington, DC. Brazilians increasingly moved to the DC region in the 1980s after the collapse of Brazil's "economic miracle" and in pursuit of employment and education.<sup>14</sup> Estimates for the number of Brazilians in the region range from 10,000 to 60,000 owing to the difficulty in counting a majority undocumented population.<sup>15</sup>

While I set out to understand the growth of evangelical religiosity among migrants, I soon realized that an accurate accounting of this phenomenon depended on sustained comparison with nonevangelical religious groups. Toward this end, my main congregational field sites included three evangelical churches (Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal), two Catholic parishes, and two Spiritist centers located in the suburbs of Washington, DC, selected for their prominence in the local Brazilian migrant community and because they represent Brazilian migrant religious life throughout the United States. While Washington, DC, attracts Brazilian migrants from every region of Brazil, and from all socioeconomic classes, most of the migrants I met were undocumented, and worked in the domestic services, construction, landscaping, or the restaurant industry. My study reflects the demographic profile of Brazilian migrants in the United States more generally, which scholars estimate to be 70 percent undocumented, as well as the broader profile of undocumented migrants in the United States from Latin America. As such, I am confident that my sample is representative not only of Brazilian migrants throughout the United States but also of affective experience and religious yearnings among undocumented migrants across nationalities.

I formally interviewed 55 women and 23 men and analyzed survey results from 35 women and 14 men (see appendix for further demographic information). I recruited interviewees and survey respondents across my primary field sites as well as through the Brazilian consulate; an email listserv catering to Brazilian women migrants; local Brazilian academics; and word of mouth. The self-authored survey consisted of thirty-eight multiple choice questions and three open-ended questions regarding individuals' religious identities, migratory histories, and spiritual experiences. I distributed paper copies within field sites and sent electronic copies through the email listserv between November 2013 and June 2014. Of the 150 surveys I distributed, I received 49 completed surveys back. Although women were overrepresented

in my study owing to the conservative gender dynamics of evangelical communities, and my greater access to women's activities and meetings, my findings among men reveal a parallel portrait of distress and the reshaping of religious yearnings.

I participated in the many religious and social activities that comprised church life across traditions, including institutional events like multiweekly worship services, prayer circles, book groups, and Bible studies, as well as community gatherings like baby showers and holiday celebrations. In addition to recording and transcribing seventy-eight interviews and collecting forty-nine surveys, I amassed a textual archive from relevant English- and Portuguese-language newspaper articles, study guides, consular brochures, and social media postings. While my primary focus remained the ordinary Brazilian migrants I met, I also interviewed diplomats at the Brazilian consulate and attended the consulate's open meetings, including those sponsored by its "Citizens' Council" (Conselho de Cidadãos). In addition to the women's listserv, these affiliations resulted in several interviews with highly credentialed, white-collar, and documented Brazilians that offer a counterpoint to my study of an otherwise largely undocumented population. These interviews revealed a strong correlation between document status, geographic location, and religious affiliation, whereby better-off segments of the Brazilian migrant population tended to assert Catholic or Spiritist identities. I analyze this comparative data in chapters 5 and 6.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### *Affect and Emotion*

*In the Hands of God* investigates migration and evangelical experience through the deliberately expansive heuristic of affect. In doing so, the book considers how migrant experience feels, how it patterns the body and mind with specific residues, and how those common sensations "bind" certain people together.<sup>16</sup> As I document in the following chapters, migrants invoked specific psychic experiences and bodily sensations in their description of migrant life, including loneliness, worry, despair, chronic pain, insomnia, weight gain, and "being stuck." These feelings newly oriented migrants toward evangelical faith and belonging, thus configuring a specific form of self-perception and sociality.

This project interrogates contemporary "structures of feeling"<sup>17</sup> by analyzing the origins and tracing the outcomes of migrant affects. I follow critical



theorists who consider private feeling to be enmeshed in political, historical, and social currents, rather than an outcome of personal hardwiring or development.<sup>18</sup> The category of affect thus reveals growing loneliness, depression, and anxiety to be public symptoms of a contemporary world defined by individualization, profit maximization, and socioeconomic bifurcation—what many scholars refer to as neoliberalism.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, several scholars have explored “stuckness” as a distinctly neoliberal structure of feeling. The culture of busyness, workaholism, and self-scrutiny derived from advanced capitalism breeds an anxiety-ridden “impasse”<sup>20</sup> defined by “depression in the form of thwarted ambition.”<sup>21</sup> In the twenty-first century, the promise of capitalism and the free market has largely proven hollow for large swaths of humanity. Instead of experiencing growth, opportunity, prosperity, and mobility, more people find themselves stalled or spiraling downward with no safety net below. The dashing of hopes and devastation of expectations configures the sensation of “stuckness,” and related dimensions of “boredom” and “precariousness,” in relation to vividly imagined yet unobtainable futures.<sup>22</sup>

Like other scholars, I found that migrants remained acutely susceptible to such “melancholic” paralysis.<sup>23</sup> During fieldwork, migrants repeatedly voiced their frustrations, anxieties, and disappointments through the language of being stuck. They found their expectations of mobility, prosperity, and inclusion in the American “dream” to be repeatedly frustrated. Without legal documents, they could not travel freely, reunite with their families, or plan for the future. They were confined to low-paying jobs that were often demeaning, dangerous, and unpredictable. And yet, they had not saved enough money to secure their livelihoods and warrant their return to Brazil.

Throughout the book, I document how the feeling of stuckness and its components of anxiety, loneliness, and despair drove migrants toward evangelical belonging. The experience of isolation and marginalization engendered the craving for intimacy and power, which migrants increasingly found in evangelical churches. As new converts, migrants learned to depend wholly upon a personal God and Christian brotherhood, and to identify God’s presence in both their internal and external environments. This novel epistemological disposition transformed individuals’ interpretation of migrant experience in the United States. Rather than feeling immobile, doubtful, and rejected, migrant believers asserted confidence, optimism, and belonging. As revealed in Rubém’s sermon on divine election, migrants refuted their

marginality and redeemed their dignity by insisting that God had specifically chosen them to live in the United States.

In my approach to affect, I invoke the “phenomenological” tradition, seeing affect not as “autonomous” from emotion, but rather as including both unconscious and conscious feeling states. In contrast to the restrictive definition of affect as “preconscious” or “prediscursive,” which makes the naming of affect overly burdensome, the broader definition suggests that feeling, knowing, and being remain deeply entangled and mutually constitutive.<sup>24</sup> As such, it becomes possible to describe the feelings people report, and investigate their likely causes and outcomes. It also becomes possible to see how institutions, like migrant religious communities, target such affect for “healing.”

Discussions of affect need not be overly abstract or technical, as critics charge.<sup>25</sup> Rather, the promise of affect lies in its expansive reach. In the stuff of human feelings (whether called “affect,” “qualia,” “emotion,” or “sensation”) lie traces of individual and collective experience, including what marginalization feels like and what new orientations, behaviors, and subjectivities such feelings provoke. For the migrants in this study, exclusion in the United States felt like loneliness, despair, immobility, and worry. It also manifested as chronic pain, insomnia, and weight fluctuation. These experiences, in turn, triggered the desire for divine intimacy, cosmological certainty, and personal power.

My invocation of affect in this sense positions my work at the intersection of two traditions often seen to be at odds with each other: the anthropology of emotion and affect theory. While often criticized for essentializing cultures as “integrated wholes,” and imposing Western psychological categories abroad, the anthropology of emotion inspired generations of anthropologists to take the feelings of their research subjects seriously and to investigate emotion as key human data.<sup>26</sup> While the anthropological study of emotion has given way to studies of embodiment, cognition, personhood, and subjectivity, the inquiry into feeling in the broadest sense remains robust.<sup>27</sup> The second tradition, affect theory, which arises from feminist and queer studies, grapples with the underlying socioeconomic and political realities that impact public and private feeling. In this tradition, scholars approach affect as bodily and psychic “traces” of much larger social structures and histories. Adopting this approach, I analyze migrant distress in the context of the broader “public feelings” of the twenty-first century.<sup>28</sup>

### *Migrant Faith and Interiority*

Studies of migration often highlight socioeconomic factors in determining migrant behavior. They consider migrant religion primarily as it impacts other spheres of life, such as family, employment, health, or politics.<sup>29</sup> While key to understanding broad trends, these studies necessarily overlook or minimize the deeply personal accounts migrants give of their faith. This book places such narratives at the center of its analysis, arguing that migrant faith and migrant experience remain entangled and mutually constitutive. By inquiring into how migrant experience shapes religious longing, this book contributes to interdisciplinary studies of migrant affective experience and helps to complement predominantly quantitative and psychological studies with intimate human-centered portraits.<sup>30</sup> In addition to documenting how migrants experience, understand, and narrate their distress, I document the robust ways in which migrants respond to their suffering. While large-scale studies may track the frequency with which migrants utilize medical, mental health, legal, and advocacy services, they fail to make visible the alternative paths migrants pursue to alleviate distress, such as religious faith, practice, and community.

This study contributes to ethnographic scholarship that emphasizes how migrants constructively draw upon faith to reconfigure identity and community postmigration. Studies of migrants from various national contexts and religious groups converge on a conclusion that my findings support: religion becomes a crucial psychological, material, and social resource for migrants.<sup>31</sup> Like the Brazilian evangelicals I met, Mexican migrants utilized evangelical institutions, practices, networks, and narratives to decide when, where, and if to migrate;<sup>32</sup> Korean migrants drew upon Buddhism to bolster their self-esteem;<sup>33</sup> Taiwanese migrants invoked Christian and Buddhist lessons to assert new gender identities and understandings of family;<sup>34</sup> and African, Caribbean, and Korean migrants invoked theological terms to make sense of their journeys.<sup>35</sup> These findings resonate deeply with the ethnographic material presented in this book, pointing to the broader therapeutic significance of migrant faith.

While these studies have documented the beneficial effect of religious belonging among US migrants, however, they often do so as part of an explicit inquiry into migrant “incorporation” or “assimilation.” To what extent, these studies primarily ask, does religion either enable or inhibit adaptation to the new cultural milieu? Several scholars, for instance, have emphasized that

religious belonging across denomination enables migrants to become “more American.”<sup>36</sup> Similar concerns animate literature on migration in the European context, but scholars have drawn inverse conclusions, highlighting religion—in this case, Islam—as a “barrier” to inclusion.<sup>37</sup> My account brackets these classic concerns. I shift attention away from questions aimed at measuring inclusion in the national polity and instead emphasize felt experience.

This approach is informed by scholarship on existential anthropology and social suffering.<sup>38</sup> Considering suffering to be both unavoidable and central to human experience, scholars document how people pursue “what really matters”<sup>39</sup> in the midst of distress, uncertainty, and suffering. Furthermore, scholars consider how human collectivity, and the many institutions involved in life together, disproportionately distributes suffering. I consider migrant distress to be akin to other forms of social suffering, defined as “the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience.”<sup>40</sup> I examine the kinds of distress migrants endure in the United States as members of a marginalized underclass, and view their turn toward evangelical Christianity as a strategy by which to assert “what really matters” in the context of exclusion. As such, this book contributes to an “anthropology of the good,” the study of how “people come to believe that they can successfully create a good beyond what is presently given in their lives.”<sup>41</sup> While living in the United States without documents entails a great deal of suffering, it also provokes individual and collective attempts at transcending and transforming distress.

### *Contemporary Christianity: Against Suspicion and Toward Understanding*

Until the early twenty-first century, the study of Christianity was marginal to the discipline of anthropology. Scholars have documented exhaustively how and why Christianity made anthropologists uncomfortable and the consequences of such intellectual as well as personal discomfort.<sup>42</sup> Christians, as an anthropological subject, were both too “familiar” and too “strange,” ultimately embodying what Susan Harding calls the “repugnant cultural other” to be intellectually discounted and personally shunned.<sup>43</sup> As a result, generations of anthropologists approached Christianity as “epiphenomenal” when they encountered it in the field, largely in postcolonial contexts, and relegated it to the margins of their study. Rather than concern themselves with the significance of Christian faith, worship, or cosmology per se, anthropologists instead trained their eye on what appeared to be the more rigorous, urgent, and

intellectually approved inquiry—the political and socioeconomic origins and outcomes of Christian belonging.<sup>44</sup>

Anthropology's entrenched discomfort with Christianity indexed twentieth-century social theorists' suspicion toward religion more generally. Embedded in disciplines meant to scientifically document and reveal the workings of human society, social theorists worked to "disenchant" religion. This approach aimed to prove that nothing eluded scientific inquiry. Even that which purported to be about invisible and supernatural experience could be captured by reason. Accordingly, the most well-known social theorists of the twentieth century considered religion "to 'really' be something other than what it purports to be."<sup>45</sup> And, more often than not, what it was really "about" amounted to something calculated, utilitarian, and nefarious. For Durkheim, religion produced collective cohesion; for Weber, economic advancement; for Marx, false consciousness; and for Freud, psychological delusion.<sup>46</sup> Taken together, these discipline-defining efforts institutionalized a deep and lasting hermeneutics of suspicion in the social scientific study of religion.

Anthropologists of religion largely followed suit, privileging sociological function of religious practice above the personal feelings of believers. In this vein, prominent scholars in the field portrayed religion to be a practical tool to manage the life cycle,<sup>47</sup> a "symbolic system" that stored deep cultural meaning<sup>48</sup> and separated "order" from "chaos,"<sup>49</sup> and as a collection of historicized "performances"<sup>50</sup> that configured normative subjectivity.<sup>51</sup> Given these entrenched norms, anthropologists who train their gaze at religious interiority—how faith feels to the individual believer, how divine encounter impacts subjectivity, how religious practice is significant in its own right—have had to defend their apparent inattention to power and politics. From the position of suspicion, believers' declarations of faith, healing, and commitment signify delusion, coercion, denial, or apathy. Whether willful or naïve, the hermeneutics of suspicion insists that first-person religious accounts should never be trusted.

What would it mean, then, to instead adopt a *hermeneutics of understanding* toward the faithful, a deliberate effort to take seriously the beliefs and self-narrations of believers *on their own terms*? Would such a position amount to the whitewashing of power, as so many scholars have assumed? Or is it possible to accept the testimony of believers *and* attend to the power structures within which such testimonies are enmeshed? Through investigating the affective lives and religious beliefs of migrants in the United States, this book strives to suspend suspicion without becoming blind or uncritical. It considers

religious belief, practice, community, sense of the divine, and testimony to emerge from migrants' encounters with social suffering at the hands of US law and society.

Adopting a hermeneutics of understanding toward migrant faith does not entail representing evangelical Christianity as a "cure-all" for structural inequality, injustice, and marginalization. It does not mean ignoring the hierarchies, exclusions, and inequities endemic to many evangelical institutions that, as other scholars have documented, often exacerbate distress.<sup>52</sup> Rather, the position of understanding entails accepting migrants' prevailing assertions of feeling "healed." It brackets the question of "sincerity" altogether and instead trusts the speaker to be the best interpreter of their own experience of social suffering. Such an approach recognizes healing, and its absence, to have occurred wherever migrants themselves identify it. A hermeneutics of understanding reveals the deep entanglement between power and religion, but rather than from a position of dismissal or ridicule, from engagement. Why do people believe? What does believing do for them, and how does it change their lives?

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In the following chapters, I advance two goals. First, I offer an ethnographically informed portrait of migrant life in the contemporary United States. While I attend to forms of distress that all migrants arguably face and have faced for centuries, I am especially concerned with the precariousness undocumented migrants experience. By inquiring into the bodily and psychic manifestation of such precariousness, I aim to enrich current debates about migration in the United States, underscoring that being a migrant alters how one feels.

Second, I demonstrate that such feelings carry important consequences. In the context of insecurity and loneliness, migrant distress gives rise to novel religious yearnings. From loneliness, isolation, and feeling stuck, migrants come to desire a personal God, an intimate community, and a comprehensive cosmology. Within this context, evangelical Christianity's massive growth and outsized popularity among migrants becomes newly intelligible. Not only does migrant distress lead to a distinctly evangelical religious orientation among migrants, but evangelical churches deliberately and effectively target migrant interiority for healing.

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