

# Carnaval em casa: Activist Inversions in Rio de Janeiro's Street Carnival during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

The carnival of 2021 of Rio de Janeiro was unprecedentedly cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the city administration knew it would have to enforce the decision and convince residents to avoid celebrating despite the restrictions. Importantly, officials largely had the support of the samba schools and the blocos of street carnival, and the blocos organized a manifesto and campaign declaring that in 2021 carnival would be “at home.” While many scholars have shown how street music can mobilize revelers, this article shows that the blocos of Rio’s street carnival also have the capacity to demobilize them. Their campaign drew on familiar carnivalesque and Brazilian tropes to rationalize a biopolitical message of civic responsibility, respect for life, and resistance to virus denialism. They played on long-standing Brazilian tropes of carnival as an ephemeral moment whose presence is fleeting and soon experienced as *saudade*, or nostalgia. I explore various manifestations of the Carnaval em Casa campaign, including its manifestos and arguments, as well as some of the alternatives that were offered, such as virtual carnival performances and new carnival songs adapted to the situation. By inverting their traditional demands to occupy the streets and instead limiting festivity to domestic space, the blocos framed their plea not as a departure from carnival tradition, but as fundamentally carnivalesque. I argue that classic carnival theories are best understood as performative rather than explanatory; that is, it is how carnival practitioners deploy the carnivalesque tropes of inversion as elements of a persuasive discourse that is my focus.

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This year there was no carnival.  
Happiness hid itself away  
And didn't say when it would return.  
It's the first time that February arrives,  
That for which I waited the entire year,  
And I'm not going to get dressed up.  
As long as there are no vaccines in arms,  
There will be no Colombinas or clowns.  
There will be no revelers singing.

But next year I will invite you  
To come with me up to Santa Teresa,  
Stage of delicacies and magic of carnivals of old.  
I promise you it will be like it was before.  
Hugging everyone with no hurry.  
Then we will descend walking together with the street-sweepers.  
We will arrive in the Paris Square  
To meet new and old friends,  
And we won't forget that our strength  
Is knowing that this sadness  
At some point will pass.<sup>1</sup>

The above text is from an original *bossa nova* entitled "Esse Ano Não Teve Carnaval" (This Year There Was No Carnival), released in August 2021 by Marcelo Cebukin, director of the Céu Na Terra music ensemble. Dressed as a clown but singing stiff and emotionless, Cebukin appears alone in the music video featuring other well-known musicians and participants of Rio de Janeiro's carnival, who also appear all dressed up with no place to go. As the text shifts toward a projected future of carnivalesque return, musically marked by a shift from minor to major that is reminiscent of the bossa nova classic "Chega de Saudade," the participants reencounter each other after a long time apart, smiling and singing.

"Every carnival has its end," as the Brazilian band Los Hermanos sang in 2001, but in 2021 carnival didn't have a beginning. Traditional forms of celebrating in crowds were prohibited in a development without precedent, as carnival was officially canceled in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, for many revelers, musicians, and producers, carnival was not so much entirely canceled as it would have to be a celebration constrained to the home. This restriction to domestic space constituted a kind of inversion of one of carnival's crucial mythologies: that it creates open spaces of encounter in public space. The belief that carnival is a rite of inversion or that it "turns the world on its head," largely associated with Mikhail Bakhtin, is after all also one of its most fundamental mythologies in the diverse places that the festivity is celebrated around the world.<sup>2</sup>

The skepticism toward that view animates one of the longest-lasting debates among carnival

1. Marcelo Cebukin, "Esse Ano Não Teve Carnaval," YouTube video, August 27, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZRGGOgAWRo&ab\\_channel=MarceloCebukin](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZRGGOgAWRo&ab_channel=MarceloCebukin). All sources originally in Portuguese were translated by the author.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1968; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

3. In January 2021, the Lowy Institute ranked Brazil last in its survey of 98 countries' management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Uri Friedman, "COVID-19 Lays Bare the Price of Populism," *The Atlantic*, May 9, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/05/covid-19-lays-bare-price-populism/618838/>.

4. Rita Fernandes, *Meu bloco na rua: A retomada do carnaval de rua do Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2019).

scholars. But in the street carnival of Rio de Janeiro in 2021, a fundamental inversion of the festivity's meaning did occur, or, perhaps, an inversion of the inversion more customary to the festivities. Scores of the city's *blocos*, or mobile carnival music ensembles distinct from the *samba* schools, urged the city's communities *not* to celebrate carnival in crowds in the name of public health, launching the "Carnaval em casa" campaign, or "Carnival at home," under the hashtags #carnaemcasa and #carnavalemcasa—or, to paraphrase the song above, they argued: "without vaccines, there can be no clowns." Carnival had already been canceled by the city authorities, but in the weeks leading up to carnival there was widespread concern that the transgressive spirit of carnival, mixed with the transgressive spirit of right-wing virus denialism, would bring Rio's residents (Cariocas) to the streets to party anyway, fed up with a year of restrictions. Engaging in a campaign to convince, the blocos used their cultural power to urge their fans to respect the decision and even pushed the city to adopt stricter measures.

This development is not in itself surprising. Many "conscious" citizens of Brazil, as elsewhere in the world during the pandemic, urged each other to stay home to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus, adopting the hashtag #ficaemcasa, or "stay at home." By contrast, Brazil's Trump-admiring right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro systematically denied the severity of the virus and urged citizens to largely go about their lives as normal, creating what was viewed at the time as the worst management of the pandemic in the world.<sup>3</sup> Local governments and communities combated this strategy of national neglect to protect themselves and others, and the Carnaval em casa movement reflects such a drive to use the cultural authority of the blocos in the vacuum of a larger coordinated response to the virus.

What is notable, however, is the abrupt shift in tactics and language of the city's blocos, who largely view themselves as militants for public space and enable "the people" to occupy the city's streets, squares, and beaches, especially during carnival but also beyond the bounds of the festivity. These ensembles of the "street carnival" (*carnaval de rua*), a term that is understood in distinction to the more controlled and mediatized samba school parades, had suffered a decline during Brazil's right-wing military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. They reemerged in popularity toward the end of the dictatorship as part of the redemocratization movement associated with the country's middle-class Left. They grew exponentially through the following three decades to become for many residents and tourists the main attraction of carnival, eclipsing the samba schools.<sup>4</sup> Fundamental to the story of many of these blocos has been resisting regulations of public space they view as authoritarian in order to fill the streets with unencumbered revelers. Yet here they were in the carnival of 2021 arguing against their very *raison d'être*. How, they pondered, could an effective argument be made to Cariocas by carnival institutions, who pride themselves on their resistance to dominant powers, that revelers must in this case obey the city's edicts?

One could imagine a different scenario, one in which these blocos declared that their right to party outweighed the health arguments to cancel yet another event, certainly the most important festivity in Brazilian culture, which some revelers did argue. Indeed, it seemed that the traditional positions of Brazil's Right and Left were suddenly inverted, with the Right embracing a liberal, carefree hedonism and the Left arguing for a conservative, disciplined behavior, a new ethic described by Slavoj Žižek: "not to shake hands and isolate when needed IS today's form of

5. Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (London: OR Books, 2020).

6. Aurélie Godet, "Behind the Masks, The Politics of Carnival," *Journal of Festive Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2020.2.1.89>

7. Beyond being outside of the scope of this article, it would have been methodologically difficult to do virtual fieldwork on groups that disobeyed the city's order or went clandestine because by definition their activities were against the law. The official blocos who perhaps disagreed with the decision to cancel carnival largely did not make public arguments criticizing it or publicly mobilize their revelers to break the law, which would have compromised future possibilities to participate in carnival after the pandemic. Even if I had been in Rio during carnival I would not have gone to such events for concern for my own health.

8. See Andrew Snyder, "From Nationalist Rescue to Internationalist Cannibalism: The Alternative Carnivalesque, Brass, and the Revival of Street Carnival in Rio de Janeiro," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 56, no. 1 (2019): 106–29, "Playing the System: The Capitalist Industry of Participatory Music Education in Rio de Janeiro's Oficinas," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 3 (2019): 119–44, "Politicizing Carnival Brass Bands in Olympic Rio de Janeiro: Instrumental Protest and Musical Repertoires of Contention," *Latin American Music Review* 41, no. 1 (2020): 27–58, "Carnival Brass Bands in New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro:

solidarity."<sup>5</sup> Although I do believe the blocos' actions were an entirely appropriate response to the crisis in their aim to save lives, my aim is not to simply celebrate these blocos' responses but to evaluate their campaign.

I argue in this article that the Carnaval em casa movement employed the language of carnivalesque inversion and other Brazilian references in order to rationalize what might seem like their contradictory embrace of limiting carnival to the domestic sphere. My intent is not, however, to use carnivalesque theory to simply explain how the blocos' uncharacteristically anti-ludic actions in fact *are* carnivalesque. Indeed, one could make a case that other responses to the unprecedented situation, such as those who disobeyed the rules, could also be carnivalesque inversions of the status quo. Rather, this article forms a broader intervention in carnival studies by viewing carnival theory as performative rather than explanatory; that is, it is how carnival practitioners deployed the carnivalesque tropes of inversion as elements of a persuasive discourse that is my focus here. As Aurélie Godet has shown, the long-standing debate about whether carnival is resistant or not has mostly run its course, with most scholars now taking a more ambivalent approach to the question.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that this shift effectively weakens the explanatory power to simply apply the famed theories of Bakhtin, Victor Turner, or Roberto DaMatta to diverse case studies. But how such carnival mythologies continue to inspire practitioners and form part of their language and rationale for action has been far less explored.

Accordingly, in this article, I examine some of the manifestations of the Carnaval em casa campaign and analyze the diverse cultural texts it generated, including their manifestos, memes, and arguments, as well as some of the alternatives they offered, such as virtual carnival performances and alternative carnival songs adapted to the situation. In particular, the blocos played on long-standing Brazilian tropes of carnival as an ephemeral moment whose presence is fleeting and soon experienced as *saudade*, or nostalgia, amidst oppression and sadness as enduring facts of life in Brazil. They imagined carnival as a future liberatory moment, deferred but not forgotten, and promised the greatest carnival of all time in 2022. In other words, they framed their plea not as a departure from the carnival tradition, but as fundamentally carnivalesque, and, crucially, it was precisely this framing that they viewed to be most persuasive to their revelers. After providing initial background on the context of the campaign, the narrative of the article unfolds chronologically from the initial conversations about the viability of carnival during a pandemic to the activities that occurred during the 2021 carnival. The scope of this article is restricted to an examination of the Carnaval em casa campaign and is not focused on all other responses to the crisis.<sup>7</sup>

This article is the result of virtual ethnography conducted outside of Rio de Janeiro on a cultural manifestation with which I have been familiar since I began ethnomusicological research in 2013 on Rio's street carnival and its alternative brass band community known as *neofanfarrismo*.<sup>8</sup> As a US-American trumpet player, I conducted long-term research on the brass community of street carnival from 2014 to 2016 and trips since through the full-bodied physical participation of playing in various blocos and bands, a visceral experience that is irreplaceable in the virtual realm. Because street carnival blocos had long resorted to social media to organize revelers in public space rather than depending on physical institutions for publicity, I was already ensconced in relevant social media networks when these discussions began. As carnival arrived, my social

Disinheritance, Alternative  
Whiteness, and Musical  
Eclecticism," *Ethnomusicology*  
65, no. 3 (2021): 519–48, and  
*Critical Brass: Street Carnival  
and Musical Activism in Olympic  
Rio de Janeiro* (Middletown,  
CT: Wesleyan University Press,  
forthcoming).

9. Maria Sonevitsky, *Wild  
Music: Sound and Sovereignty in  
Ukraine* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan  
University Press, 2019), 22.

media was stormed by online street carnival not dissimilarly to how Rio de Janeiro itself feels besieged by physical carnival.

Most of my research for this article is based on engaging in the conversations that played out online, as well as close readings of online carnival events and other posted materials. It was enriched through informal discussions in a WhatsApp group with Brazilian carnival scholars who were key in disseminating the *Carnaval em casa* manifesto. In connecting virtual and physical ethnography, I am inspired by Maria Sonevitsky's research on Ukrainian popular music conducted from abroad, which connects "ubiquitous digital objects of internet public culture to the thickness of situated ethnographic research ... [attempting] to privilege local knowledge frameworks and to make interpretive moves derived from long-term ethnographic fieldwork even when the ostensible topic of concern is a media text like ... an online music video."<sup>9</sup> This account may lack the perspective of being in Rio during the absence of the annual festivity, but it shares the experience of many Cariocas who were similarly cooped up in their homes, watching these developments play out online.



Figure 1. The bloco of Orquestra Voadora in the pre-COVID times of 2012. Photo courtesy of André Ramos.

### The Political Positioning of Rio's Street Carnival

Except for being outdoors, carnival blocos involve a veritable list of forbidden acts in a pandemic. Musicians blow into horns and breathe heavily while beating out syncopated rhythms amidst the full-bodied participation of *foliões* (revelers), who sing, jump, and dance in elaborate costumes. Beer, water, and the sugar-cane liquor *cachaça* are generally considered public goods rather than private property; a musician might buy a drink and pass it to a friend who passes it to an

acquaintance, and the drink is never seen again. Foliões are packed like sardines against one another in an effort to get closer to the musicians who have only a bit more room by virtue of their separation from the audience marked by a cord surrounding the ensemble. Despite the commotion, it is common to witness strangers locked in stationary embrace and oblivious to the outside world as the bloco passes by (fig. 1).

“You know who else loves illegal parties? The virus.” So read a Brazilian meme that passed through my social media feeds aiming to convince revelers not to celebrate carnival in 2021 because of the risks of such behavior to public health. Indeed, the first documented case in Brazil was reported on Ash Wednesday in 2020 just as the celebrations were finishing, and carnival was later blamed as a super spreader event. As Brazilians were introduced in the following months to the vocabulary of the pandemic—social distancing, masking, avoiding crowds, staying at home—it soon became clear that carnival without a vaccine would be irresponsible and deadly. “No vaccine, no carnival” (*sem vacina, sem carnaval*) became a rallying cry as Rio’s carnival institutions pondered how to move forward in this new reality. Though it became clear by October 2020 that neither the samba schools nor the blocos would be celebrating carnival in February 2021, assuring the shutdown of the blocos would clearly be a more complex task than the samba schools. The samba schools are massive, official institutions represented by LIESA (Liga Independente das Escolas de Samba do Rio de Janeiro), and they require a variety of infrastructural needs managed by the city in order to prepare and manage their elaborate parades.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, the very informality and variability of the bloco concept as well as the self-sufficiency of Cariocas crowds to entertain themselves through informal singing and instrument playing meant that canceling Rio’s carnival would be more complex than canceling many other festivals around the world. Generally encompassing outdoor mobile music groups that parade through public space, the term “bloco” refers to a wide range of ensembles—from percussion groups (*baterias*) to brass bands and outdoor dance parties, united more by their distinction from the official samba schools than any other characteristic. Over five hundred blocos were registered in 2020, not counting the many more unofficial blocos who argue against submission to the city’s registration system. The term encompasses enormous events, such as Bola Preta’s two million foliões, as well as small groups of friends strolling and singing with a tambourine (*pandeiro*) who pick up paraders along the way. Furthermore, during the revival of street carnival that began in the 1980s during the transition from dictatorship to democracy, many blocos had consistently opposed the city regulations and control measures that were adopted to control the growing festivities.<sup>11</sup> When Mayor Eduardo Paes, for example, announced in 2009 a variety of regulations forcing blocos to register in an official management system, a movement of “unofficial carnival” emerged to oppose the city’s control, arguing for the fundamental right to gather unrestricted in the public commons. As I have shown elsewhere, political expression and activism increased markedly among the blocos as the country confronted a range of political, economic, and health crises during the volatile 2010s.<sup>12</sup>

It is in this context in January 2021, expecting that not all musicians and foliões would comply with cancellation, that about 150 blocos and bloco organizing “leagues” (*ligas*) signed on to and widely shared a Carnival em casa manifesto (fig. 2). It was launched by musicians

10. For general history of Rio de Janeiro’s carnival, see Felipe Ferreira, *O livro de ouro do carnaval brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro, 2004); and Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, *Carnaval Brasileiro: O vivido e o mito* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1992).

11. Cíntia Fernandes and Micael Herschmann, *Música nas ruas do Rio de Janeiro* (São Paulo: Intercom, 2014).

12. See Snyder, “Politicizing Carnival Brass Bands,” and *Critical Brass*.



Figure 2. Manifesto logo from #carnaemcasa page.

of the alternative brass community of street carnival (neofanfarrismo), which is one of the most politicized and leftist subsets of the street carnival and is predominantly middle class (a demographic that skews to the whiter end of Brazil's racial spectrum). Being part of the leftist middle classes, these blocos are among the most predisposed to "listen to the science" and to embrace precautionary measures, such as lockdowns, social distancing, and masking. While they framed their justification as an inversion of right-wing virus denialism and of their own traditional rhetoric, their true goal was not simply to invert hegemonic power, whatever it might be for the sake of it, but to use carnivalesque logic to argue for a predefined political position. Such middle-class and left-leaning blocos were overrepresented among the signatories of the manifesto, but the manifesto also reached an impressively diverse range of solidarity, with signatures from the traditional, massive Bola Preta to the activist, unofficial Ocupa Carnaval. Many groups did not sign the manifesto, however, and it cannot be taken as the view of all blocos or foliões of street carnival but rather as one particular perspective within a carnival community of millions. The manifesto reads:

Street carnival is a movement, a force that resists and occupies, creating for the people a space that belongs to them. This year, however, as paradoxical as it might seem, staying at home will be our form of resistance—resistance to the denialism that is an instrument of the politics of death. It is vital that we declare a firm position.

Therefore, we—blocos, ligas, brass bands, and the movements of street carnival of Rio de Janeiro—hereby declare in this manifesto that we will not parade in 2021. We call on all citizens to join us in this historically difficult moment in which we live.

When we are all safe and immune, we will create the greatest carnival this city has ever seen. Meanwhile, in this movement, we are all united for life. We ask you to avoid crowds and stay at home.

Carnival lives in us and feeds our souls. When it is time for it to come back to us, no one can hold it back.<sup>13</sup>

It is this apparently "paradoxical" position, the inversion of carnival's essential meanings in the minds of practitioners, that the rest of this article explores.

### A Necropolitical Virus Management

The manifesto specifically resists the "denialism" (*negacionismo*)<sup>14</sup> that is the "instrument of a politics of death." By contrast, the blocos position themselves as "united for life." Indeed, this was,

13. Quoted in André Videira, "Quando o Carnaval de Rua do Rio de Janeiro decidiu ficar em casa," *O Cafezinho*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.ocafezinho.com/2021/01/25/andre-videira-quando-o-carnaval-de-rua-do-rio-de-janeiro-decidiu-ficar-em-casa/?fbclid=IwAR0FVgZM8INcbhGe0XQm1BvPXCBRu54-gWM6jRhkxSa7y3jPOvfyiH1F8Y>.

14. On Bolsonaro's virus denialism, see André de Macedo Duarte and Maria Rita de Assis César, "Denial of Politics and Denialism as a Policy: Pandemic and Democracy," *Educação e Realidade* 45, no. 4 (2020): 1–22.

15. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

16. Videira, "Quando o Carnaval de Rua do Rio de Janeiro decidiu ficar em casa."

17. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. R Hurley (1976; repr., New York: Random House, 1998).

18. For necropolitical interpretations of Bolsonaro's management of the pandemic, see Jimena de Garay Hernández, Amanda Motta Castro, and Marcio Rodrigo Vale Caetano, "Necropolíticas do Governo Bolsonaro - Gênero, classe e raça no contexto da pandemia," 1991. *Revista de Estudios Internacionales* 2, no. 1 (2020): 166–70.

19. See Ivandilson Miranda Silva, "O governo Bolsonaro, a crise política e as narrativas sobre a pandemia," *Revista Brasileira de Pesquisa (Auto) Biográfica* 5, no. 16 (2020): 1478–88 for an account of the discursive battles over the pandemic in Brazil.

20. Maria Bopp, "No fim do mundo tem carnaval!" Facebook, February 10, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/bopp.maria/videos/3845020352216178/>.

of course, a matter of life and death. Carioca musician and scholar André Videira, who had a hand in writing and disseminating the manifesto, explains the rationale of the movement in an online article by citing Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics,"<sup>15</sup> which Videira refers to as "a politics of administration of death for certain social groups." Videira continues: "Bolsonaro's government, in transforming denialism into an electoral chip, has turned the expansion of death into a model of managing the crisis."<sup>16</sup> Mbembe's concept builds on Foucault's concepts of biopower and biopolitics,<sup>17</sup> referring to the social and political management of life. I suggest that the manifesto's embrace of the value of life constitutes a biopolitical campaign by Carnaval em casa that affirms its own biopower to manage life as a means of resistance to Bolsonaro's necropolitical policies.<sup>18</sup> Between these two dominant discourses, there has been, of course, much more complexity and nuance in the ways that institutions and citizens have negotiated life with the virus, but the discursive battle between these dominant right- and left-wing perspectives formed a political backdrop to the Carnaval em casa movement.<sup>19</sup>

That the instinct to celebrate carnival with abandon despite the risk of death became associated with Bolsonaro and Brazil's right wing is clear from a satirical carnival song composed by Edu Krieger in the style of the samba schools' *samba-enredo* songs ("story sambas" that focus on a theme and are sung on repeat during rehearsals and the final carnival parade). In her interpretation of the song, influencer Maria Bopp lip-synchs the lyrics as she is surrounded by carnivalesque decorations in the yellow and green of the Brazilian flag, colors that have especially been associated with the right wing since the conservative protests against the Workers Party that exploded in 2016.<sup>20</sup> She wears a military hat associated with "Captain" Bolsonaro, drapes herself in a Brazilian flag, and sings:

Hello, Unidos da Cloroquina!  
Let's crowd together!  
Brazil has become a paradise.  
I don't need anyone speaking ill of it.  
I'm doing great!  
Enough of this riffraff who believe in science  
And see interference in the federal police.  
Oh vaccine, this talk of vaccine.  
It has nothing to do with me.  
It's a thing of the past.  
I want to stuff myself with hydroxychloroquine  
And spend 15 million reais on condensed milk.  
Not with me,  
Nobody fools me.  
There is no corruption.  
I know that the earth is flat.  
I deny that I am a denialist.  
I am just well informed.  
In the vaccine there is a communist microchip.  
My uncle sent a Whatsapp message  
Where this is proved.  
My aunt did too!  
And whoever wants to prevent themselves from seeing



That the gravy train is over  
Is cheering against my Brazil  
Just because you can't live anymore on the Rouanet Law,  
I don't know what that is,  
But I saw it on my uncle's WhatsApp ...  
May God protect the first son of Captain Bolsonaro  
Throw away your face mask,  
Come celebrate carnival!

"Unidos da Cloroquina" is a play on the names of some samba schools, such as Unidos da Tijuca, and refers to the drug hydroxychloroquine that Bolsonaro hyped as a cure for the virus long after even Trump gave it up. Under Bolsonaro, Brazil is a "paradise" that should not tolerate dissenters, be they scientists, cultural workers who have been supported by the Rouanet cultural incentive law, those worried about Bolsonaro's executive overreach, or, for that matter, those concerned with the huge sums of government money spent on Bolsonaro's personal tastes, including condensed milk and candy. These expenditures do not match the "corruption" of the Workers Party—corruption that has supposedly stopped entirely since the impeachment led by the right wing put an end to fourteen years of their center-left rule in 2016. Denying that she is a denialist, the singer spouts a menu of disinformation, including flat eartherism and microchips in vaccines, that has spread to her through her family WhatsApp groups, which are widely blamed for the rapid spread of disinformation in Brazil. In stark contrast to the blocos' manifesto, the singer gleefully calls for the Unidos da Cloroquina to crowd together, throwing face masks aside, to celebrate carnival.

As a satire of Bolsonaro, the song represents a leftist depiction of the Right that is perhaps simplified but is sadly, in my view, not much exaggerated. Bolsonaro is widely reported to have surpassed Trump in what was then the worst response in the world, leaving 240,000 Brazilians dead of COVID-19 as of carnival in 2021. When the virus arrived in Brazil, Bolsonaro minimized it as only a "little flu" (*gripizinha*). When the death toll mounted to 5,000 in late April 2020, he callously responded, "So what? Sorry, but what do you want me to do?" He sacked a series of health ministers who refused to spout hydroxychloroquine propaganda. Throughout the pandemic, Bolsonaro denigrated mask wearing and social distancing measures, held mass rallies, and homophobically encouraged Brazilians not to be "sissies" (*maricas*). As with Trump, Bolsonaro's contracting of the disease in July did little to change his tune. Once vaccines became available, he fueled unfounded fears about their safety, suggested they might turn people into crocodiles, and failed to secure them as they became available, ignoring early offers from Pfizer.<sup>21</sup> As he downplayed the virus, Brazil suffered and the country became a breeding ground for new, more contagious and deadly variants.

Early on in the pandemic, Brazilians beat pots and pans from their windows in nightly rituals calling for his ouster ("*fora Bolsonaro*"). Later evidence showed that Bolsonaro had favored a hands-off approach of letting the virus freely circulate to reach herd immunity.<sup>22</sup> In the absence of federal response, local governors, city officials, and communities took measures "into their own hands."<sup>23</sup> The crisis was treated in a prototypically neoliberal manner, as responsibility for safety was transferred to individuals and local communities. In March 2020, as the virus began to spread, favela gangs in Rio de Janeiro imposed their own social distancing and curfew measures on their communities before the state acted, proclaiming, "If the government doesn't

21. Anthony Boadle et al., "Brazil's Bolsonaro asks Pfizer to speed up COVID vaccine delivery," Reuters, June 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/brazils-bolsonaro-asks-pfizer-speed-up-covid-vaccine-delivery-2021-06-15/>.

22. "Brazil: Bolsonaro never wanted vaccines, says senator," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/22/brazil-bolsonaro-never-wanted-vaccines-says-senator>.

23. Ernesto Londoño et al., "Bolsonaro, Isolated and Defiant, Dismisses Coronavirus Threat to Brazil," *New York Times*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-coronavirus.html>.

24. Ernesto Londoño et al., "As Latin America Shuts Down to Fight Virus, Brazil and Mexico Are Holdouts," *New York Times*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/americas/coronavirus-brasil-mexico.html>.

25. "Eduardo Paes descarta carnaval em julho no Rio: 'Impossível,'" *O Globo*, January 21, 2021, <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2021/01/21/eduardo-paes-descarta-carnaval-em-julho-no-rio.ghtml>.

26. Fernanda Machado, Juciano Rodrigues, Anna Bonan, and Maria Nunes, "A falta que o carnaval faz," *Observatório das Metrópoles*, February 18, 2021, [https://www.observatoriodasmetrolopes.net.br/a-falta-que-o-carnaval-faz/?utm\\_source=Facebook&utm\\_medium=Post&utm\\_campaign=Facebook\\_671&utm\\_content=A%20falta%20que%20o%20Carnaval%20faz&fbclid=IwAR2pr8RYbC1FTZbwTr8zB2WE8DpAdnpNZc14gomT2-9dhPMz6fotXG8Z0QY](https://www.observatoriodasmetrolopes.net.br/a-falta-que-o-carnaval-faz/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Post&utm_campaign=Facebook_671&utm_content=A%20falta%20que%20o%20Carnaval%20faz&fbclid=IwAR2pr8RYbC1FTZbwTr8zB2WE8DpAdnpNZc14gomT2-9dhPMz6fotXG8Z0QY).

27. Tom Philips, "Anger as Bolsonaro moves to make guns easier to access: 'A threat to democracy,'" *The Guardian*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/15/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-guns-easier-to-acquire>.

28. Emmanuelle Lallement, "From Bal Masques to Masked Balls: Festivity in the Era of Social Distancing," trans. Aurélie Godet, *Journal of Festive Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 33. <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2020.2.1.87>

have the capacity to handle this, organized crime will."<sup>24</sup> The federal necropolitical management of the crisis guided by neoliberal neglect must be understood within the much longer context of Brazilian history in which life, especially the lives of People of Color, has often been treated as expendable.

On March 13, 2020, Rio de Janeiro announced safety measures, including the closing of schools and beaches and the prohibition of events involving crowds.<sup>25</sup> Other governors around the nation who instituted lockdowns entered into conflict with Bolsonaro, who, like Trump, portrayed himself as chiefly concerned with the economy. By June 2020, a first wave receded and governors opened back up, putting the onus on individual communities to decide how to navigate the virus. But by November, a second wave was on the rise that would still be worsening by the time of carnival in 2021. Rio de Janeiro was among the worst urban areas affected and by carnival time had the highest death rate in the country.<sup>26</sup> As carnival approached, Bolsonaro's negligence was manifest as he mostly ignored the country's most important cultural event and the crisis it faced, focusing his attention instead on easing access to guns, which he announced on the Saturday of the 2021 carnival.<sup>27</sup>

### Will There Be Carnival?

It is in this context of political polarization and deflection of responsibility to local communities that the institutions, participants, and workers of carnival were forced to ponder what would happen to the annual festivity. By April 2020, my social media feeds were embroiled in the question "Will there be carnival?" (*Vai ter carnaval?*). To many, canceling carnival was unthinkable, and, indeed, one could cite good reasons to worry about such a drastic measure. The street carnival revival had proved its vibrant capacity to reignite the city's festive culture, complicating modernist narratives that view festivity as inevitably in decline with the gradual atomization of social life. As Emmanuelle Lallement writes, "the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly lent credence to the hitherto inconceivable hypothesis of a future disappearance of festivity. After all, didn't it involve social mixing, physical proximity, rubbing elbows, haptic feedback?"<sup>28</sup> Street carnival movements had regularly bucked civic authorities, and participants certainly worried that the "new normal" could result in lasting damage to Rio de Janeiro's carnival culture, a reasonable concern the impacts of which will not be fully known until the pandemic is over.

Moreover, as was frequently mentioned in the media, carnival had an impressive track record of carrying on despite a litany of crises, including world wars and dictatorship, and attempts to interfere with the timing of the event had famously failed. In 1892, the city's worries over the sanitary impact of the garbage generated by the event in the heat of February prompted postponement until June. But the decision simply resulted in carnival celebrations in both February and June. Similarly, in 1912, the popular Barão do Rio Branco died right before carnival, and the event was rescheduled for April after Lent to respect mourning. Again, carnival was simply celebrated twice.<sup>29</sup> More than a century later, it was reasonable to expect that city regulations could be widely disrespected.

Carnival was even celebrated in early 1919, soon after the deadly "Spanish flu" had stricken Rio de Janeiro in late 1918, killing forty thousand in Brazil and fifteen thousand in Rio, though death estimates from the 1918 pandemic are notoriously sketchy. The Spanish flu was far more virulent

29. Felipe Lucena, "Na história, carnaval do Rio já foi adiado duas vezes, mas não deu certo," *Diário do Rio*, August 19, 2020, <https://diariodorio.com/na-historia-carnaval-do-rio-ja-foi-adiado-duas-vezes-mas-nao-deu-certo/>.

30. Rafael Câmara, "O carnaval do fim do mundo: como a gripe espanhola revolucionou a folia carioca," *360 Meridianos*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.360meridianos.com/especial/carnaval-rio-1919-gripe-espanhola>.

31. Ricardo dos Santos, "O Carnaval, a peste e a 'espanhola,'" *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* 13, no. 1 (March 2006): <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702006000100008>.

32. Fernandes, *Meu bloco na rua*.

33. Alba Mendonça and Enildo Viola, "Escolas de samba do Rio dizem 'ser inviável' haver desfiles em 2021 sem vacina para a Covid-19," *O Globo*, July 14, 2020, <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/carnaval/2021/noticia/2020/07/14/escolas-afirmam-ser-inviavel-haver-desfiles-em-2021-sem-vacina-para-a-covid-19.ghtml>.

34. Manuela Andreoni and Ernesto Londoño, "The Carnival Parade Is Canceled, and Rio Is Reeling," *New York Times*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/world/americas/rio-carnival-postponed.html>.

than the novel coronavirus of 2019, attacking populations with more ferocity but generally moving on more quickly, and by early 1919 the active outbreak appeared to have subsided. Another outbreak was still a threat, however, and officials counseled Cariocas to avoid crowds. Fortunately, carnival was not associated with a worsening of the contagion. Instead, 1919 is widely remembered as one of the greatest carnivals in history, an expression of renewal and cultural effervescence in the face of collective tragedy. Cordão da Bola Preta, one of the oldest surviving blocos, was founded that year and is currently the most popular bloco in the city.<sup>30</sup>

In true Carioca fashion, revelers in 1919 turned the health disaster into fodder for topical satire, as they would do again over a century later. In their carnival song, the Bloco of the Flu-stricken (Bloco dos Gripistas) mocked the promotion of *quinino*, a traditional remedy for malaria, which was hyped by the pharmaceutical industry without medical proof, not unlike hydroxychloroquine: "he who takes quinino won't be left behind." Other songs celebrated cultural renewal in the face of death, such as the song by the Clube dos Democráticos:

There is no sadness  
that can stand so much happiness.  
Those who didn't die of the Spanish [flu] ...  
Come laugh and play.<sup>31</sup>

As Cariocas faced a similar situation in 2020 regarding the 2021 carnival, these historical precedents were cited on various sides of the argument. The cases of 1892 and 1912 might reveal the futility of canceling carnival, and the case of 1919 shows the importance of festivity despite the risks. Ultimately, however, 1919 was cited by those in favor of canceling the 2021 carnival as evidence of the carnival that would come to patient Cariocas once the risk of COVID-19 had passed.

Arriving at this conclusion involved a prolonged and challenging process involving discussions between the mayor's offices, the carnival managing agency RioTur, samba schools, and bloco ligas, especially the liga of Sebastiana, the blocos of which are largely associated with the revival of street carnival coming out of the dictatorship.<sup>32</sup> These carnival institutions quickly coalesced around the view that without a vaccine, there could be no carnival, a position affirmed by some of the largest samba schools as early as July 2020.<sup>33</sup> On September 24, 2020, LIESA unanimously announced the official postponement of the samba school parades and in November rescheduled them for July 2021 on the condition of vaccination. This was the first time the samba school parades were postponed since their first manifestation in 1932. Emphasizing their contrast to Bolsonaro, the *New York Times* reported that it was "said that, in suspending this year's parade, the leaders of Rio's carnival associations had shown they were more responsible than the federal government."<sup>34</sup> On October 29, 2020, RioTur, together with major street carnival ligas and blocos, made an announcement that there would be no street carnival in 2021 either, not even entertaining the idea of postponing until July. This was a regulatory decision that allowed the city police force to criminalize blocos and foliões if they did not obey. Despite a lack of national direction on the issue, most Brazilian cities followed a similar course of canceling the 2021 carnival.

While it was clear by September 2020 that there would be no typical carnival in February 2021, the idea of holding the samba school parades in July created a new pressure point for the city.

35. Tiago Ribeiro, "E se essa fantasia fosse eterna: Um estudo sobre a relação entre as datas do carnaval a construção do sentido da festa," *Interfaces* 30, no. 1 (2020): 119–37.
36. Rita Fernandes, "Carnaval numa hora dessas?" *Veja Rio*, January 14, 2021, [https://vejario.abril.com.br/blog/rita-fernandes/carnaval-pandemia/?fbclid=IwAR3sevKp\\_B2cxkhYg7D6iHWHZgchVPK0dAL90362\\_Gi7NDj0hCnGc0PvbnFl](https://vejario.abril.com.br/blog/rita-fernandes/carnaval-pandemia/?fbclid=IwAR3sevKp_B2cxkhYg7D6iHWHZgchVPK0dAL90362_Gi7NDj0hCnGc0PvbnFl).
37. "Eduardo Paes descarta carnaval em julho no Rio: 'Impossível,'" *O Globo*, January 21, 2021, <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2021/01/21/eduardo-paes-descarta-carnaval-em-julho-no-rio.ghtml>.
38. Fernandes, "Carnaval numa hora dessas?"
39. Michel Alcoforado, "Carnaval online é como chupar bala com papel," *CBN*, February 2, 2021, [https://m.cbn.globoradio.globo.com/media/audio/331675/carnaval-online-e-como-chupar-bala-com-papel.htm?fbclid=IwAR02J25erJ-5yQDvG1xjtMKcwOkqSXyQ637FJ2y5qx1jJ1GDIK1Y\\_eoHYlw](https://m.cbn.globoradio.globo.com/media/audio/331675/carnaval-online-e-como-chupar-bala-com-papel.htm?fbclid=IwAR02J25erJ-5yQDvG1xjtMKcwOkqSXyQ637FJ2y5qx1jJ1GDIK1Y_eoHYlw).
40. Richard Schechner, "Carnival (Theory) after Bakhtin," in *Carnival: Culture in Action—The Trinidad Experience*, ed. Milla Cozart Riggio, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6–7.
41. "Manifesto Momesco," *Desliga dos Blocos*, September 7, 2010, <http://desligadosblocos.blogspot.com/2010/09/manifesto-momesco.html>.

State governor Cláudio Castro seized on the opportunity in January 2021 to attempt to create a new event called *CarnaRio* in July that might be held annually. But the idea of celebrating carnival outside of the calendrical cycle bound by the Catholic Church generated its own controversies. Such carnivalesque events outside of official carnival time are referred to as "carnival outside of the season" (*carnaval fora de época*) and have engendered a long history of debate about whether they can be considered truly carnivalesque.<sup>35</sup> Leader of the Sebastiana liga Rita Fernandes criticized the prospect of a July carnival, charging Castro with having had little discussion with or buy-in from the city's carnival institutions about the viability of carnival events in the middle of the year: "carnival is serious business and must be thought of us as such.... Rio de Janeiro has never responded well to a carnival outside of February." Beyond these considerations, she noted, the festivities would conflict with Brazil's June parties (*festas juninas*): "We must respect the [cultural] cycles."<sup>36</sup>

Such debates about the wisdom of a *carnaval fora de época* ended by January 24, 2021, when Mayor Eduardo Paes canceled July celebrations, as it became clear that the condition of widespread vaccination could not be upheld.<sup>37</sup> Fernandes insisted: "We maintain our decision, independently of any government: Rio's street carnival will only be held with vaccination and immunization of the population. We will have transmissions, live virtual performances, content, virtual workshops, whatever is necessary to maintain activity and the importance of the date. Anything else would be complete irresponsibility."<sup>38</sup>

### A Deviation from Carnival Ideals?

But carnival at home, for many, seemed to be a contradiction in terms. As anthropologist Michel Alcoforado commented, carnival online is like "sucking on wrapped candy" (*chupar bala com papel*). While he argued that even though it was possible to have fun at home and it was unwise to celebrate carnival normally during a pandemic, as the "happiness of one person cannot trample on the life of another," "one thing is one thing, and another is another."<sup>39</sup> For him, carnival's essence is based in human contact, crowding, and rupture of the quotidian, and its essence is untranslatable to the virtual medium. Many carnival and ritual scholars and practitioners agree. Richard Schechner writes that "carnival can really happen only in outdoor spaces, in the streets ... dissolving the boundaries between inside and outside, private and public."<sup>40</sup> For the street carnival movement in Rio de Janeiro, the appropriation of public space by a mass of bodies is likewise crucial to the authenticity of carnival. The unofficial street carnival liga *Desliga*, a play on the words *liga* (league) and *desligar* (disconnect), proclaims, referencing Castro Alves's poem "O Povo ao Poder," that "the square is the people's as the sky is the condor's."<sup>41</sup>

Such prominent narratives dismiss the long history of carnival balls and elite, exclusive carnivals that do happen indoors, and Mikhail Bakhtin himself wrote that in carnivalesque settings, "the atmosphere of ephemeral freedom reigned in the public square as well as at the intimate feast in the home."<sup>42</sup> For Brazilian carnival scholar Roberto DaMatta, authentically carnivalesque celebrations can occur in the home, but they are above all a mark of class separation: "the place for singing and dancing, especially in the case of the upper class, is a house or club—certainly not the street."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, DaMatta's understanding of rituals in Brazil is based on the resignification of the symbolic opposition between the "street" (*rua*), an all-encompassing signifier for uncontrolled public space, and the "house" (*casa*), a signifier of authoritarian private space. With DaMatta's

42. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 89.
43. Roberto DaMatta, *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 68.
44. *Ibid.*, 35.
45. *Ibid.*, 70.
46. Andrei Venturini, "Vamos colher os frutos nefatos destes encontros clandestinos; é muito triste," *CBN*, February 2, 2021, <https://m.cbn.globoradio.globo.com/media/audio/331825/vamos-colher-os-frutos-nefatos-destes-encontros-cl.htm>.
47. Alberto Ikeda, "O carnaval é uma explosão coletiva, o fazer junto," *CBN*, February 13, 2021, <https://cbn.globoradio.globo.com/media/audio/331772/o-carnaval-e-uma-explosao-coletiva-o-fazer-junto.htm>.

theory widely known by carnival practitioners in Brazil, the notion that *street* carnival could be celebrated at *home* took on added irony for the Carnaval em casa campaign.

For DaMatta, in carnival, "it is the 'street' (a rua, meaning the impersonal world), in its most generic sense as opposed to 'home' (a casa, which represents the personal universe), that is the appropriate space for ritual.... The center of the city ceases to be the inhuman locale of impersonal decisions, and instead it becomes the meeting place of the whole population."<sup>44</sup> DaMatta argues that it is primarily in public space that encounter between social others normally marked by hierarchy can be deconstructed, producing liminal, carnivalesque experiences of social intimacy and equality, which, though fleeting, might carry transformative potential. Ritual events like carnival involve a process of "symbolic dislocation," "or passage of some element from one domain to another,"<sup>45</sup> in which elements of the separate domains of street and house invade the other. In carnival, for example, the bodily satisfaction and intimacy associated with the privacy of the home can be expressed in public space, even with strangers.

But such an analysis does not explain the motivations or experience of 2021's Carnaval em casa movement, in which the motivation to maintain private space is not social exclusion, but fear of contagion. In a pandemic, private spaces can only be experienced with full intimacy in an exclusive quarantine pod. There can be no carnivalesque openness to the other, and carnival's transformative capacity to break down social barriers is usurped by the pandemic's even stronger transformative capacity to demand social distancing in all circumstances. Though much of the street carnival movement has been defined by carnivalesque transgression and rule breaking, for these practitioners, the rule of the pandemic was a higher one that could not be broken without incurring disaster, making this obstacle to festivity distinct from all others against which carnival participants had fought.

No prominent carnival theory applies well, therefore, to understanding the situation that Rio's carnival blocos confronted in 2021. Despite plenty of epidemics and plagues in world history, there is little writing that contends with how festivity is transformed when physical intimacy is unavailable. The Carnaval em casa virtual events did aim to produce what DaMatta would call a "symbolic dislocation" by virtually bringing carnival into the house. But no one suggested that the events that the blocos produced were fully satisfactory or the "real thing." Lacking recourse to the familiar arguments about street carnival's transformative capacity, the Carnaval em casa movement found itself inventing new theoretical paradigms with apparent paradoxes that drew their inspiration from the spirit of Bakhtinian inversion: to practice carnivalesque resistance was to maintain distance and stay at home.

But one could also note that the blocos were simply recognizing reality. Many media reports indeed focused on the recognition that carnival ideals could not be attained and that carnival at home would be an inadequate but necessary substitute. Philosopher Andrei Venturini argued that we must "experience a carnival that is possible and not an ideal carnival.... One of the characteristics of carnival is transgression.... But if we do that today we will invite enormous problems. The possible carnival is the online carnival, but without a doubt online carnival is not carnival."<sup>46</sup> Ethnomusicologist Alberto Ikeda similarly suggested that "carnival is above all an encounter. Without that, it is only an effort to mitigate the lack of this emotionality" while we wait for it to return.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, waiting emerged as a theme of the campaign. Waiting is also part of the

48. Lallement, "From Bal Masques to Masked Balls," 36–37.

49. Lila Grey, *Fado Resounding: Affective Politics and Urban Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 83.

mythology of carnival in Brazil, as Chico Buarque famously sang in "Quando o carnaval chegar" that his sober demeanor was due to his "waiting for carnival to arrive." But in a pandemic, waiting is a prolonged process for the hopeful fulfillment of an uncertain promise. In the European context, Lallement observes similarly, "because it is both a promise and a source of worry for the days to come, festivity right now is mostly experienced as a projection.... For now, festivity is biding its time."<sup>48</sup>

Coming to terms with the insufficiency but necessity of virtual carnival while waiting for the return of the "authentic" carnival was described by many as an extreme expression of saudade. The term is a foundational, and famously untranslatable, element of aesthetics and affect in the Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) world. Lila Gray refers to it as a "a philosophical-historical-poetic topos of longing" that "exists as a way of being in the present and *feeling* the past ... while dreaming for a future."<sup>49</sup> To feel saudade for carnival is to feel a gut-wrenching lack, one that can only be, as is said in Portuguese, "killed" through experiencing the thing itself. But the thing itself, especially in the case of a temporally bound ritual, is by nature transient and will soon depart, leaving more saudade in its shadow and creating a cycle of ephemeral gratification and subsequent suffering. The traditional Portuguese mode of engagement in this cycle of impermanence is to fully experience saudade and the longing for the past and future, a process of aesthetic and emotional purging that leaves one, ultimately, still in saudade. Carnival songs are filled with such poetics, and the bossa nova song "Felicidade" (Happiness), composed in 1958 by Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes for the iconic French film *Orfeu Negro* about Rio's carnival, provides an excellent example:

Sadness has no end,  
But happiness does.  
Happiness is like a dew drop  
On a flower petal.  
It glows beautifully  
And slightly swings,  
And then it falls like a tear of love.  
The happiness of the poor appears to be  
The great illusion of carnival.  
We work all year  
For a moment of dreams  
To create a fantasy  
Of being a king or pirate or gardener  
For everything to end on [Ash] Wednesday.  
Sadness has no end,  
But happiness does.

In this song, sadness is an eternal return, an inescapable fact of life from which only illusory but meaningful moments can provide temporary relief and make life bearable. But 2021 provided an exceptional year when sadness could not be escaped and saudade could not be temporarily killed. At best, saudade could be alleviated by virtual events, because if saudade were actually killed through traditional modes of festivity, others would also be killed in an uncontrolled chain of infection.

50. Alcoforado, "Carnaval online é como chupar bala com papel."

51. Thais Sousa, "Carnaval de rua do Rio é cancelado em 2021; blocos vão aguardar a vacina," *O Globo*, October 29, 2020, <https://oglobo.globo.com/rio/carnaval-de-rua-do-rio-cancelado-em-2021-blocos-va-ao-aguardar-vacina-24718989>.

52. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, repr. New York: Bloomsbury, 2000).

53. Lencinho Smith, "Conversa Voadora com André Videira," Instagram, February 11, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLIZYHWlw3s/>.

In accounts of carnival that are skeptical of carnival's resistant potential, it is the very cyclicity of the event, expressed in Brazil as its periodic killing of *saudade*, that allows an unequal country like Brazil to maintain itself as it does. In the so-called "safety valve" or "bread and circus" carnival theory, liminal moments of freedom serve to reinforce an unjust status quo by creating a temporal structure focused on future fulfillment—the next time to kill *saudade*—rather than present rectification of an unjust social structure. 2021 presented an exceptional test case for this iconic theory, as Michel Alcoforado noted: "Roberto DaMatta would say that if Brazil didn't have carnival it would explode—before the pandemic, of course. And now? Exploding is not an option."<sup>50</sup>

### A Biopolitical Campaign

As street carnival was canceled at the end of October 2020, *Globo* reported that the *liga* of Sebastiana had proposed to the city to engage in a "campaign of critical consciousness raising about the risks that street carnival could mean for public health ... we must use the force that the blocos have through their networks to communicate so that other groups also understand that carnival is impossible and that everyone must be responsible."<sup>51</sup> The Portuguese term used in this quote is *conscientização* and is sometimes translated as "consciousness raising," or the process of making others critically conscious. Associated with the radical pedagogue Paulo Freire, the term is based in post-Marxist critical theory and is embedded in his philosophy of an education that makes oppressed people aware of their oppression.<sup>52</sup> The blocos ascribed to themselves a pedagogical role using the tools at their disposal to argue that there could be no alternative to celebrating at home.

Another keyword in the above citation from *Globo* is "responsible." Through this campaign of *conscientização*, they aimed to promote responsible behavior rather than solipsistic hedonism, so often associated with the Left but in this case promoted by the denialist Right and their arguments against measures to contain the virus. Responsibility, judgment of hedonistic behavior, and moral rectitude are, of course, not concepts regularly associated with carnival or what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque—the indulgence in bodily pleasure and gratification as all social norms are turned on their head. In the face of governmental neglect, the irony of carnival movements promoting responsibility was not lost on participants. But, as André Videira defends in a broadcast interview, the ways that street carnival blocos self-manage their events already involve many forms of responsibility. Foliões must take care to protect vulnerable participants, manage the inebriated, and not leave trash in their wake: "We are the people of carnival, so we must take care ... in this context of street carnival as an experience of freedom in which we do not depend so much on directions and organizations, it is important that we create a culture of the street, create consensus, create shared views." Later in the interview, he argues that "everything that involves encounter requires caution. This caution is manifested in the guidelines that the blocos and ligas have incorporated in past years for a politics of the street that prioritizes inclusion, diversity, mutual respect, and empathy."<sup>53</sup>

Carnival is often depicted as a personalized force of nature that slowly emerges and ultimately sweeps up foliões in its wake before dying down until its next cycle, arriving and departing on its own terms. But the language of responsibility emphasizes its human-made nature, the power of revelers to make moral choices within what is largely viewed as a hedonistic event.

54. Ribeiro, "E se essa fantasia fosse eterna."

55. "Sem folia, blocos caricas lançam campanha por distanciamento social," *VejaRio*, January 27, 2021, <https://vejario.abril.com.br/cidade/blocos-rua-rio-campanha-distanciamento-social/>.

As the carnival date approached, the blocos, in concert with and also in distinction to the city's prohibitions, used a variety of ludic methods to promote consentização, including writing new words for famous carnival songs, composing new songs, spreading memes, and publishing position statements that promoted self-denial from carnival as the authentically carnivalesque form of resistance.

This preparatory period is known as *pre-carnaval* and officially begins in Rio on the first weekend of January, which is associated with the end of Christmas season marked by Epiphany (Dia de Reis) on January 6. When exactly the actual carnival season is launched is a subject of much debate,<sup>54</sup> and carnival events—such as open bloco rehearsals, parades, and theme dances—have been temporally expanding in recent years far beyond the four official days of carnival preceding Ash Wednesday to the weeks and months before as well as after the event, with "hangover" (*ressaca*) events that can last weeks into Lent. The request to celebrate carnival at home, therefore, was not to avoid a mere long weekend of celebration but an entire summer season, each weekend of which would normally be filled with events lasting until dawn. Indeed, summer had already been drawing pandemic-fatigued people to parties, especially New Year's Eve, in what was perceived as a worrying development. The weeks leading up to carnival involved a barrage of campaigning, especially heightened during the weekends, to keep up discipline and stay home. For example, the city's biggest bloco and one of its oldest, Cordão da Bola Preta, added the biopolitical message "respect for life" to their motto, "Tradition, peace, and revelry" (*Tradição, paz, folia e respeito à vida*), and repeated the motto in every possible form of public media.

The city itself played a crucial role in this cultural campaign, resulting from meetings with LIESA, Sebastiana, and other prominent carnival institutions and participants. On January 26, Mayor Eduardo Paes, who has portrayed himself as a "friend of carnival," especially in contrast to the



Figure 3. Image of the official street carnival theme T-shirt in 2021.<sup>55</sup>



56. Eu faço samba, "Bloco das Carmelitas 2021," YouTube video, January 20, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhQLtFIVPoY&ab\\_channel=EuFa%C3%A7oSamba-Qcanaldosambaautorat](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhQLtFIVPoY&ab_channel=EuFa%C3%A7oSamba-Qcanaldosambaautorat).

recently unseated evangelical Mayor Crivella, who famously detested carnival, participated in the action "Street Blocos United for [Social] Distancing" (Blocos de Rua Unidos pelo Distanciamento). They unveiled a campaign T-shirt that depicts traditional carnival imagery along with a vaccine syringe injecting hearts of different colors (fig. 3). The city administration could, however, be viewed more broadly as the "stick" of the campaign, promising punishment for revelers who disobeyed the law, with the blocos providing various "carrots" in the form of cultural engagement. Moreover, the city and the blocos were not always aligned, and the blocos' cultural campaigns successfully pushed the government to cancel the traditional optional work holiday on the Monday of carnival, cancel CarnaRio in July, and provide financial resources for everyone involved in the "productive chain" of carnival.

The samba-enredo and accompanying video by Bloco das Carmelitas, shared on social media in early 2021, is illustrative of many of the campaign themes and some of the ways the blocos used carnivalesque repertoires and other Brazilian aesthetics to make their case.<sup>56</sup> By referencing the local Carmelitas Convent of Santa Teresa, the bloco's name connects the ensemble to the hilly Bohemian neighborhood of Santa Teresa that is especially associated with intimate street carnival celebrations, as many blocos and samba schools are traditionally neighborhood-based. Carmelitas uses the samba-enredo style but also clearly references Chico Buarque's famous samba "Vai passar" (This will pass), quoting both this phrase and the same melodic ascendance in the opening line. Buarque, who is associated with the 1960s leftist musical movement known as Música Popular Brasileira (MPB), composed the song in 1980 as pro-democracy movements were gathering steam against the military dictatorship. He sings that this "unhappy page of our history" will pass from the sleeping country of Brazil, whose awakening is metaphorically expressed in the language of the arrival of carnival, a promise of eventual fulfillment for those who wait through difficult circumstances to finally kill *saudade*. Carmelitas's brief textual and melodic citation of the song before moving to a wholly different text and melody creates an immediate connection between the present disaster and Brazil's military dictatorship, a disaster that did, in fact, pass. The rest of the song addresses the present reality directly:

This will pass.  
Today the message is of science.  
When the pandemic ends  
And another carnival comes  
I will celebrate carnival like a child.  
Santa Teresa is in silence,  
But at the right moment our tram will return  
The people will take the street and sing  
To show who is lord of this place  
Vaccinate, Vaccinate!  
If the bishop could leave,  
So can the virus!  
I am conscious, I am not a sissy,  
I mourn, Captain ...  
These strange days of drought and calm,  
For twenty-two days, just like a crazy person,  
I will samba with the bateria.  
I am Carmelitas!

This year our revelry will be online.  
Hats off to the SUS! [Sistema Único de Saúde/National Health System]  
A worldwide reference.  
It can be Russian, Chinese, or Yankee,  
But I want a vaccine and a president who is humble.  
What saudade of the [convent] nun and my bloco and of you all.  
Soon, soon, we will be able to see each other again.  
It is better to walk straight to end these hard times.  
Faith in science!  
Avoid crowds, it's not long to wait!

The song's pedagogical message is not cloaked in obscurity, as the bloco clearly advises its foliões to believe in science, get vaccinated, avoid crowds, and enjoy online carnival. This "conscious" moral code of "walking straight" and "mourning" death rejects that of a "non-humble president." The song uses evidence for the thesis that "this will pass" by citing other challenging situations that have indeed changed, making reference to the evangelical "bishop" Mayor Crivella, who lost reelection in 2020, and the Santa Teresa tram (*bonde*). The *bonde* is an icon of Santa Teresa that emblemizes the neighborhood's resilience, having returned in 2015 after four years of absence following a deadly accident. Echoing the promises for the greatest carnival in 2022, the familiar theme of waiting through this "drought" to kill saudade with carnival's eventual return is expressed in the future-oriented focus of the song: soon Santa Teresa's silence will end, they "will be able to see each other again," and they will "samba like crazy people." Ultimately, the future occupation of the streets after disciplined waiting will show who is truly in control—the "lord of this place." In the meantime, carnival will have to be experienced virtually, as the image



Figure 4. Carmelitas carnival T-shirt image from the bloco's Facebook page.

57. Eduardo Paes (@eduardopaes), Twitter, February 12, 2021, [https://twitter.com/eduardopaes/status/1360273137666056192?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1360278690605760513%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es3\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.soubh.com.br%2Fnoticias%2Fvariedades%2Fveja-a-propaganda-de-carnaval-que-o-prefeito-do-rio-copiou-de-bh](https://twitter.com/eduardopaes/status/1360273137666056192?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1360278690605760513%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es3_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.soubh.com.br%2Fnoticias%2Fvariedades%2Fveja-a-propaganda-de-carnaval-que-o-prefeito-do-rio-copiou-de-bh).

58. From “Sebastiana” (@Sebastiana.carnalderua), Facebook, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/sebastiana.carnalderua>.

the bloco released on social media illustrated, showing Santa Teresa’s famous tram during carnival on a cell phone (fig. 4).

Alongside these new carnival songs, other traditional carnival songs were adapted to the occasion, especially the popular carnival marches (*marchinhas*), widely known and relatively simple seasonal songs that celebrate carnival with playful, satirical, and humorous themes, such as the widely shared version of the carnival march “Até Quarta-Feira” (Until Ash Wednesday).<sup>57</sup> The original song’s lyrical expression of saudade for a carnival in which the singer could celebrate with a former lover is translated to the current context in which everyone is separated from each other, implying that other foliões are each other’s lovers who are unattainable this year. In the video, a woman sings the original first verse to herself alone as she puts on carnival make-up in a mirror at home:

This year will not be equal to the last,  
When I celebrated and you also celebrated.  
That costume that I bought  
Will stay kept at home, and yours too  
Will stay hung up [in the closet], for this year it is planned  
That we will celebrate separated.

The song’s first line, “This year will not be equal to the last,” expresses what Fred Goés referred to as the “permanent relation” between carnival and saudade by virtue of being a “rite of passage that is never equal and never repeats itself” (personal communication). But the line took on a more poignant meaning in the vastly different experience of carnival during the pandemic from the year before. Notably, and ironically, this version does not contain the line in the second verse that is thematically relevant for the original romantic context: “if it happens that my bloco meets up with yours, no problem—no one will die.” Instead, an official-sounding male speaking voice advises after the first verse: “Responsibility for the security and health of all will always be our priority. Carnival can wait, but your life cannot. Be conscious and avoid crowds.”

Sebastiana published marchinhas with rewritten lyrics as a series of shareable memes on Facebook, building on a preexisting Carioca practice of topical rewriting of marchinhas adapted to current events. Sebastiana changed the first line of “Abre Alas” to “Open the wings, for I want to

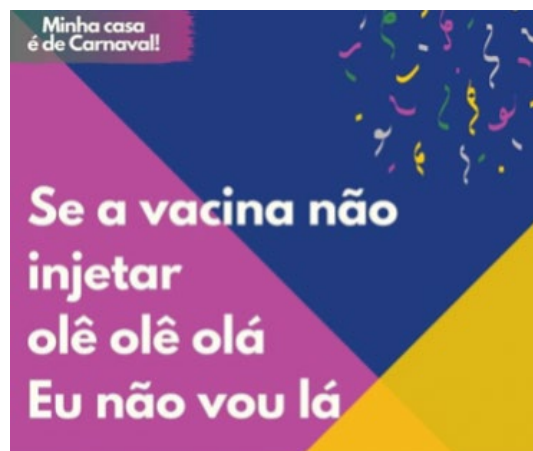


Figure 5. Meme of the “Rower’s March” with “My house is of carnival” written above<sup>58</sup>.

59. "Confira a programação dos blocos virtuais que vão agitar foliões na web para evitar aglomerações nas ruas," *O Globo*, February 7, 2021, <https://outline.com/pXCg3j>.

60. See Snyder, "From Nationalist Rescue to Internationalist Cannibalism," and *Critical Brass*.

pass and see everyone vaccinated" (*O abre alas, eu quero passar e ver todo mundo se vacinar*). The first line of "Me Dá um Dinheiro" is changed from "Hey, you there, give me some money" to "Hey, you there, tell everyone, this year I'm not going out" (*Ei, você aí, avisa pra galera, este ano não vou sair*). The eponymous first line of the song "I want to put my bloco in the street" was followed by "but this year, that's impossible" (*mas esse ano, não dá*). The "Rower's March" (March do Remador) rewrites the first line, "If the canoe doesn't turn over, olê olê olá, I will arrive," as "If the vaccine is not injected, olê olê olá, I'm not going" (fig. 5).

In a story about the virtual events that would soon take place, such references to marchinhas proliferated: "Arlequim (wait for it) will not cry for the love of Colombina in the middle of the crowd [a reference to 'Máscara Negra'], neither will the funnel team show up wherever there is a bottle or barrel [reference to 'Turma do Funil' (Drinking Team)]. But who says there won't be any swinging [reference to 'Balancê'] in this carnival?"<sup>59</sup> Who indeed?

### Carnival at Home

For those ready to stay at home for carnival, playfully referred to on this occasion as *folions*—a combination of *folião* and "online"—there was a full schedule of carnival events to watch during the pre-carnival weekend and the several days leading up to and including carnival Tuesday. Though not every major carnival group produced carnival content, there was a wide range of broadcasts, including classic samba parades, playlists, live performances, performances for children, and workshops devoted to carnivalesque activities like carnival make-up or making homemade instruments. All of the events had the explicit intention to provide diversions for people staying home to avoid illegal parties. The street carnival blocos produced live-streamed performances without audiences, (referred to in Brazil as *lives*), participation in which required the musicians to get COVID-tested before performing. Many of these events received support from the city and the Ministry of Culture, as they were united in the cause.

I will discuss here only a few of these events by blocos, in which I have been a frequent participant during previous physical fieldwork trips, to show how they attempted to create a carnivalesque experience for folions by bridging the gap between the street and the house, as DaMatta understands these separate domains. Beyond that binary, I also focus on how they negotiated two other dichotomous tensions in this new online format: traditionalist vs. experimental and presentational vs. participatory. Rio's street carnival movement emerged preoccupied with reviving what it viewed as authentic particular repertoires and performance practices of Brazil's past. In the mid-2000s, with the arrival of the internet, there was a shift toward thematic blocos and blocos that experimentally sought inspiration in global references, including Super Mario Bloco, Technobloco, and Sargenta Pimenta (a translation of "Sargeant Pepper")—a Beatles music bloco.<sup>60</sup> In the online format, blocos both referenced traditional performance practices and used the medium in new and experimental ways, affirming the continuing importance of both tradition and innovation in street carnival.

Regarding performance styles in the new medium, Thomas Turino's distinction between "participatory" and "presentational" performance "fields" is useful, as performances on a screen were inherently more presentational than physical carnival blocos. For Turino, whereas a presentational performance makes a clear distinction between the roles of performers and

61. Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29.

62. See Snyder, "Playing the System," and *Critical Brass*.

63. Céu na Terra Núcleo de Cultura Popular, "É a folia do #CeunaTerraEmCasa!!!" YouTube video, February 6, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR0CIdaS8hJEUgm9smFAt3bmevtN8P0SR5V7kO6wHerfOW5hk\\_zDFY0yWM&v=KfJMX8xnrOg&feature=youtu&ab\\_channel=C%C3%A9unaTerraN%C3%BAclodeCulturaPopular](https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR0CIdaS8hJEUgm9smFAt3bmevtN8P0SR5V7kO6wHerfOW5hk_zDFY0yWM&v=KfJMX8xnrOg&feature=youtu&ab_channel=C%C3%A9unaTerraN%C3%BAclodeCulturaPopular).

spectators, participatory performance is based on an "ethos that everyone present can, and, in fact should, participate in the sound and motion of the performance."<sup>61</sup> A prominent organizing principle of blocos is based on an expandable format along a spectrum of presentational to participatory performance. Orquestra Voadora, for example, refers to a twelve-person presentational brass band (*banda*) that offers a year-round weekly class (*oficina*) for 200–300 people to prepare 300–400 people to play in the annual carnival bloco. This participatory ethos has been a major point of pride in the street carnival movement, and participants often speak ill of the presentational carnival spectacle that they associate with the contemporary samba schools.<sup>62</sup> But in many Carnaval em casa performances, the sometimes vague distinction between band and bloco in a normal carnival was strongly reasserted. Performances were based much more strongly on a presentational format that tended to feature the few members of the core band addressing online folions, many of whom would, outside of the pandemic, normally be part of the bloco playing directly alongside the band members, or at least singing their hearts out jammed against one another. But blocos also engaged new ways to encourage the participation of folions to bridge the divides between participatory and presentational performance, street and house.

Céu na Terra (Heaven on Earth), directed by Marcelo Cebukin, whose song was discussed at the beginning of this article, is such an ensemble that is based on a smaller performance band that plays year-round and also organizes a carnival bloco. Founded in 2001, Céu na Terra has been focused on a traditionalist project of representing diverse musical genres of Brazilian folkloric cultures. The bloco's core repertoire, however, consists of the above-mentioned carnival songs known as marchinhas that were broadcast on the radio beginning in the 1920s. Céu na Terra's producer, Jean de Beyssac, explained to me the genre's importance in Brazilian cultural memory and its visceral attachment to carnival: "People know the songs; even if they don't know all the words, they know the refrains. It's something that is very much in the consciousness of people in Rio de Janeiro, and of all Brazilians.... Singing marchinhas is a ritual" (personal communication). In their normal carnival bloco, around a hundred musicians play these songs in a prescribed order with sequences of rehearsed actions that indeed provide a ritualistic feeling to participants. They begin with the oldest marchinha, "Abre Alas," and foliões sing the words as the musicians play. Then comes the introduction for "Turma do Funil," after which musicians all crouch on the ground intoning an "F" on accented quarter notes, then quote an ominous line from the Star Wars Death March, subsequently start the orientalist introduction to "Allah-La-Ô," and finally jump up to start that marchinha's upbeat major section.

In their online performance, the band enacts this same sequence that would normally be performed collectively.<sup>63</sup> Instead of the chaos of a hundred musicians playing the songs with varying levels of ability while foliões sing around them, the sound of the professional musicians of the band is crisp, in tune, and highly arranged, and instrumentalists alternate sections with professional singers. Though recalling collective performance practices, the online performance is much closer to the kind of show that the band would present than to the experience of the bloco. The lead singers address the online crowd between songs and introduce the musicians, expressing the saudade that they have for physical presence of foliões and looking forward to carnival's physical return. But they also claim that they are "invading the houses" of participants in a kind of disruption, or "symbolic dislocation," of DaMatta's street/house dichotomy. Signaling the convergence of carnival and the pandemic, some musicians wear artistic masks covering the mouth rather than carnival masks that cover the eye (fig. 6).



Figure 6. Screenshot of Céu na Terra's online pre-carnival show.

The closest feeling of collective participation is perhaps expressed in the accompanying social media engagement and YouTube chat functions, where participants could engage with one another, react to the music, and frequently proclaim, "Down with Bolsonaro!" The bloco invited folions to take pictures of themselves dressed in carnival costumes and post them to its social media pages. Though carnival felt inaccessible to many during the pandemic and carnival at home seemed a poor substitute, in some ways these virtual events were more accessible. The woman in the bottom right of the above screenshot is a sign language interpreter who translated the entire concert as well as several other online carnival shows. The chat comment of one folion showed that this engagement was the first time she was able to participate in Céu na Terra, as she was not from Rio: "For the first time, I am a participant in this bloco!" Indeed, the pandemic allowed me the opportunity to experience and research Rio's carnival from abroad and bring my year-old baby to carnival events, which would have been impossible in the physical world.

Many of Céu na Terra's bloco participants have only experienced the bloco as a yearly presence at carnival, without having seen the band's performances, of which there are not large public shows during carnival. By contrast, a precursor to Céu na Terra, Cordão do Boitató (1996), is a highly professional performance band that organizes a bloco parade in the pre-carnival weekend and a presentational performance by the core band that lasts eight hours on the Sunday of carnival. Thus, its concert forms a well-known element of street carnival that is perhaps more translatable to the screen due to its preexisting presentational spectacle form. Lasting only three hours in 2021, Boitató's online carnival show presents a kaleidoscope of Brazilian music genres featuring a who's who of contemporary musicians.<sup>64</sup> It features frequent pictures of the bloco parades over the years in an effort to identify the presentational form on the screen with the absent participatory experiences of the bloco to alleviate the folions' saudade. At one point, one of the musicians notes, "by now we would be at Gomes Freire," referring to how long it would normally take the parading bloco to arrive at a point in the center of Rio. The musicians frame the digital experience as constituting an experience of togetherness: "we are with you. You are

64. Teatro Riachuelo Rio, "Carnaval Virtual, Cordão do Boitató," YouTube video, February 14, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKv5KG\\_64sU&fbclid=IwAR0hpVwCnSfwneP9fmBeqy7268pvoCsSVzMxxYM68gwjl0udiqhISi8nzmA&ab\\_channel=TeatroRiachueloRio](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKv5KG_64sU&fbclid=IwAR0hpVwCnSfwneP9fmBeqy7268pvoCsSVzMxxYM68gwjl0udiqhISi8nzmA&ab_channel=TeatroRiachueloRio).

not alone, and we are bringing carnival with quality music to your house.” They repeat many of the campaign themes of *Carnaval em casa*, giving homage to nurses and promoting vaccination: “Vaccine yes, vaccine now, so that carnival can return” (*Vacina sim, vacina já, para que o carnaval possa voltar*). The musical director wears a hat with vaccine syringes hanging from the sides (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Screenshot of Boitatá’s online carnival show.

65. Orquestravoadora, “Voando em Casa,” YouTube video, February 16, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVZ9OSydbRM&ab\\_channel=orquestravoadora](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVZ9OSydbRM&ab_channel=orquestravoadora).

The carnival broadcast of Orquestra Voadora (the Flying Orchestra) does not follow these other blocos’ formats, but rather presents a variety of media forms.<sup>65</sup> MC Lencinho Smith presides, frequently calling on viewers to “make some noise from their houses” as he presents the different sections of the virtual show on the “aterro da internet,” a wordplay on the Aterro do Flamengo park where Voadora’s bloco normally practices and parades. This differing format is in line with the experimental trajectory of Orquestra Voadora, founded in 2008 by musicians who had experience with the more traditionalist and Brazilian-focused aesthetics of Boitatá and Céu na Terra but became more engaged with international musical traditions. Their virtual carnival moves between expressions of the presentational band and the participatory bloco, including professional music videos, socially distanced videos recorded by amateur musicians of the band’s oficina, band members playing live to recordings, and footage of past carnival performances by the bloco. A frequently recurring GIF (fig. 8) shows the band’s saxophonist playing and blocking an awkwardly dancing Donald Trump, while Bernie Sanders sits comfortably unobscured with his famous inauguration gloves alongside a collision of other memes. At the bottom left corner, they leave a QR code to encourage financial contributions to the band, a strategy adopted in the virtual performances of many other musicians who lost their livelihood during the pandemic.



Figure 8. Screenshot of Orquestra Voadora's recurring meme.

Perhaps the most experimental carnival adaption is by Monobloco. Adapting a role-playing game (RPG), the bloco directed folions to create their own folião avatars through whom they could virtually engage with other avatars and collectively celebrate with one another to the bloco's music, with the result broadcast on YouTube (fig. 9).<sup>66</sup>

66. Monobloco Oficial, "Desfile Monobloco—Carnaval Cidade Alta 2021," YouTube video, February 13, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KybaNDEeh9s&ab\\_channel=MonoblocoOficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KybaNDEeh9s&ab_channel=MonoblocoOficial).

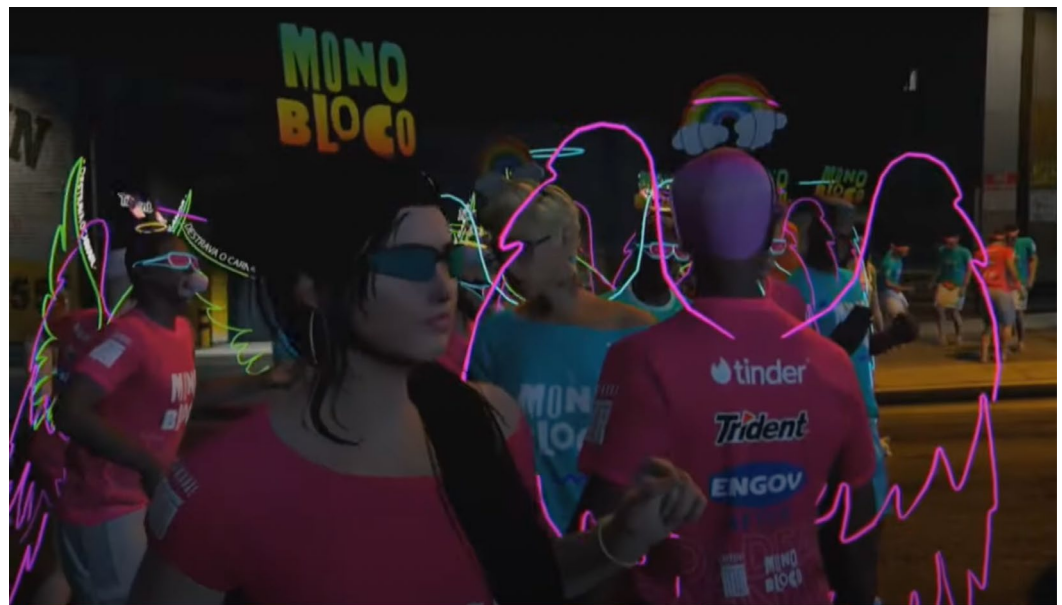


Figure 9. Screenshot of Monobloco's virtual carnival.

These diverse expressions of carnival at home constitute an unprecedented explosion of creativity in response to the exceptional situation of carnival's cancellation. Navigating folions' desires for familiar references and traditional carnival experiences with innovative offerings, the blocos explored a variety of ways to use the inarguably more presentational format of online performances to induce feelings of participation and merge the memory of multitudes of bodies in the street with the intimacy of the domestic gatherings at home.



## Evaluating a Carnival Campaign

In this article, I have explored the Carnaval em casa movement as a cultural and political campaign launched by a critical mass of the city's blocos, aiming to convince Cariocas not to celebrate carnival and uncharacteristically aligning with the city's regulations. The case represents only one of many situations around the pandemic-stricken world in which communities took measures into their own hands to save lives in the face of governmental abdication of responsibility. I have examined how the blocos collectively used their means of communication as a form of cultural activism. They used familiar carnival references and performance practices in new mediums in order to frame self-denial from physical carnival as the authentically carnivalesque act, and in doing so they sought to make the lack of traditional carnival more palatable and comprehensible. Since the request for carnival to be at home is itself, as they admit, a paradox, I have argued that its logic can best be understood through the campaign's strategic deployment of the trope of carnivalesque inversion, in which the world briefly stands on its head and becomes utterly different from what is considered normal. In transforming what might be dismissed as their hedonistic theories of carnival into explicitly activist ones, they showed themselves to be preoccupied with ethics, challenging any dismissal of carnival as simply apolitical fun.

But if the campaign's strategy appears to be an inversion of Bolsonaro's approach on the one hand and of their own traditional discourses on the other, one could also argue that not celebrating during a pandemic is not much of an inversion of the "new normal." The campaign's inversion of an inversion could also be viewed as nothing more than a double negative that ends up reaffirming the social order of the pandemic. In this respect, one could view the Carnaval em casa movement as carnival has often been interpreted—not as a ritual of inversion but as one that upholds the status quo. Indeed, both pandemics and carnival have in common the penchant for social disruption and the departure from norms but also perhaps the maintenance of particular kinds of social orders. My point in this article has not been, however, to evaluate whether the campaign's approach "truly" constitutes a carnivalesque inversion, but to show the inspirational relevance of such ideas in making a persuasive case about how to engage with carnival in this exceptional moment.

While many scholars have shown how street music has the power to mobilize revelers in public space, this case shows that carnival musicians also have the capacity to *demobilize* them. But how many revelers were actually demobilized? If we view this movement as a campaign devoted to the realization of a particular end, we can also ask how successful it was. What was actually happening in the streets during carnival? The samba parade structure (*sambódromo*) was lit up with the colors of samba schools and transformed into a drive-thru vaccination site, and many other streets and public spaces were, in fact, empty. But many were not.

Despite the prohibitions and risk of punishment, celebrations did occur in the form of "clandestine blocos" and illegal parties indoors and on boats. In what Mayor Paes called a "game of cat and mouse," images circulated of clubs being evacuated by riot police and tear gassing of clandestine blocos, one of which called itself "Costumed but Unmasked."<sup>67</sup> Some foliões defended their right to party in any circumstances, and others claimed they were helping those in the productive chain of carnival survive. A sign held up by one reveler in a media report captured the sentiment

67. Marcela Lemos, "PM usa gás lacrimogêneo para dispersar bloco de carnaval clandestino no RJ," *UOL*, February 12, 2021, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2021/02/12/pm-usa-gas-lacrimogeneo-para-dispersar-bloco-de-carnaval-clandestino-no-rj.htm?fbclid=IwAR0mrU9kMPtywmxJtUnJcqEgvBp34iFr6hjuzClVvj8u4SPVxVcuypHw2vU>.

68. "Polícia interrompe festa clandestine e detém 170 pessoas na Zona Leste de SP," *CBN*, February 12, 2021, [https://m.cbn.globo.com/media/audio/331675/carnaval-online-e-como-chupar-bala-com-papel-htm?fbclid=IwAR02J25erJ-5yODyG1xjtMKcw0kqSXyO637FJ2y5qx1JJ1GDIK1Y\\_eoHYIw](https://m.cbn.globo.com/media/audio/331675/carnaval-online-e-como-chupar-bala-com-papel-htm?fbclid=IwAR02J25erJ-5yODyG1xjtMKcw0kqSXyO637FJ2y5qx1JJ1GDIK1Y_eoHYIw).

69. "Governo lança campanha 'Brasil Não Pode Parar' contra medidas de isolamento," *CNN Brasil*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/2020/03/27/governo-lanca-campanha-brasil-nao-pode-parar-contra-medidas-de-isolamento>.

70. Before samba rose to the status of iconic national music in the 1930s when Brazil significantly reframed the country's national identity away from its traditionally elite, Euro-centric affiliation toward one that exalted mixed-race and Afro-Brazilian culture, samba musicians were repressed and persecuted, as were other Afro-Brazilian traditions that proliferated after the end of slavery in 1888.

71. Ana Felício, Eduardo Silva, and Lucas Veloso, "Por que aglomerado?," *Mural*, February 12, 2021, <https://www.agenciamural.org.br/especiais/jovens-relatam-os-motivos-para-irem-a-festas-durante-a-pandemia/>.

72. Ernesto Londoño, "At Rio's Carnival, Vaccine Jabs Are In, Glitter and Samba Out," *New York Times*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/americas/rio-carnival-coronavirus.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>.

of many: "carnival cannot stop,"<sup>68</sup> recalling Bolsonaro's campaign launched early in the pandemic in March 2020 in response to the pandemic, "Brazil cannot stop" (*O Brasil não pode parar*).<sup>69</sup> In "normal" times, these images might generate sympathy for the revelers among street carnival participants as well as sharp critiques of the city and its repressive attitude towards musicians. The sight of police confiscating musical instruments triggers memories of the repression of early samba musicians, Afro-Brazilian culture, and contemporary street music culture.<sup>70</sup> But in these times of the "new normal," street carnival participants ambivalently viewed these measures as necessary responses to a denialist right wing, despite unresolved worries that these new, violent regulatory powers could pose new repression toward street carnival in the future. Surely the revelers who disobeyed the city's orders likely also viewed themselves as inverting the status quo of the pandemic and resisting the unjust dominant power of the city's cancellation. Indeed, a performative approach to carnival theory focuses not on explaining which response was the more authentically carnivalesque response but on understanding how carnival ideals can inspire a range of potentially irreconcilable actions.

Those who celebrated, however, had varied motivations that cannot be reduced to only right-wing denialism. In a thoughtful article published during carnival, the authors explore the reasons that poorer people in peripheral areas of São Paulo went to carnival parties. They note the general sentiment that asking those with the privilege to work at home to also stay home during carnival was one thing. But to ask those working "essential jobs," already constantly exposing themselves to risk of infection, to avoid one of few opportunities for entertainment was quite another. They characterize many poorer revelers' attitudes: "On a crowded bus I'm not going to get COVID-19, but I will at a dance?"<sup>71</sup>

These legitimate critiques notwithstanding, the city's shutdown of carnival was largely successful; as the *New York Times* reported, "the vast majority of traditional Carnival party organizers appear to be complying with the rules."<sup>72</sup> Though the city's cancellation and repression were likely far more effective at achieving this shutdown than the cultural campaign alone—and I have not found any empirical estimation of the impact that *Carnaval em casa* might have had—it is likely that it had a crucial, even if marginal, contribution to further convincing Cariocas who might have been otherwise tempted to attend illegal parties to stay home, especially by providing virtual carnival shows that could allow foliões to pass the time. Through the city's propaganda, the media, and social media, the *Carnaval em casa* movement was impossible to ignore, and who better to spread the message that now is not the time for carnival than the purveyors of revelry themselves?

Whatever impact the campaign may have had in preventing celebrations was certainly critical. On the Tuesday of carnival in 2021, Rio registered the highest number of cases yet recorded, 8,385, and the country was headed on a worrying trajectory. Within the next month, Brazil became the undisputed center of the pandemic before it was surpassed by India. Brazil proportionally surpassed the United States' horrific records of daily deaths, reaching over 4,000 deaths in a day by early April in a deadly wave that would leave the country with half a million dead by June 2021. The free circulation of the virus in Brazil made the country a laboratory for new variants, and Brazil was increasingly portrayed by the international media as a "global hazard." The spike in March was, in fact, blamed on illegal carnival gatherings as well as other summer parties.

73. Lallement, "From Bal Masques to Masked Balls," 34.

74. With street parties banned due to coronavirus pandemic, Brazil's iconic Carnival goes online," *Firstpost*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/with-street-parties-banned-due-to-coronavirus-pandemic-brazils-iconic-carnival-goes-online-9306381.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20would%20like%20to%20be,feeling.%2C%E2%80%9D%20she%20added.>

75. Raniere Figueiredo, "2021, Um Carnaval de Memórias," YouTube video, February 17, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ooj5-Sq9oc&ab\\_channel=RaniereFigueiredo.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ooj5-Sq9oc&ab_channel=RaniereFigueiredo)

Certainly, a situation that is already terrible can always be made still worse, and the Carnaval em casa campaign's success can be measured in terms of its impact in mitigating the crisis. In yet another inversion, if, as DaMatta claimed, Brazil would explode without carnival, it is quite likely that in 2021 the explosion would have been much worse with a full-blown carnival.

What of the campaign's aesthetic and emotional success? Can such a virtual carnival kill the saudade for this quintessentially Carioca and Brazilian event in its exceptional absence? What does this case portend for a future in which pandemics are more likely? Lallement asks more broadly about festivity during the pandemic, "Could festive phenomena survive outside the traditional setting for festivity? Should the novel practices be considered as mere surrogates or as heralds of a new code of behavior? Studying the forms that festivity took when reduced to a minimum, were we not getting a preview of the future transformations and restructuring of our lives?"<sup>73</sup> As many have felt about virtual events substituting for live events, they may be better than nothing, but they are not the "real thing," thus illustrating the continuing importance of experiences people feel to be "authentic," even if many scholars have rejected the word. Sebastiana president Rita Fernandes herself admitted, "We would like to be partying in the street, but we can't.... Streamed shows are important, but symbolic. They bring us memories of Carnival and reaffirm what it means to us. But it doesn't generate the same feeling.... I did not dress up or dance in front of a screen."<sup>74</sup> Celebrating carnival at home was ethically framed as the most authentically carnivalesque act, but on an affective level it was not *felt* to be authentically carnivalesque.

When carnival does return in a safer environment, hopefully in 2022, these same Cariocas fully aim to reengage in a physical festive event with abandon. But what the aftertimes will look like is a question. It remains to be seen whether the traditional liberal bodily excess of sharing drinks, kisses, and physical space will have been disrupted forever by memories of social distancing and worries of contagion. But although saudade may look nostalgically on the past as it faces present loss, there is a kernel of optimism in its expectation of the future. On Ash Wednesday 2021, the day after carnival officially ended, Raniere Figueiredo published a video called "2021, A Carnival of Memories," an homage to the street carnival to "soothe its weary souls" in this year of pandemic.<sup>75</sup> The video presented footage of celebratory scenes of street carnival blocos in normal times set to Luiz Bonfá's classic song from the film *Orfeu Negro* (1959), "Manhã de Carnaval" (Carnival Morning). The song's lyrics emblemize the cyclical shifts between present absence and past and future fulfillment that are fundamental to the trope of saudade. Using the hashtags "stay at home" (#ficaemcasa), "protect yourself" (#seproteja), and "get vaccinated" (#sevaccine), the video's final clip explains that this year carnival was impossible, but the carnival next year will be "legendary." As is sung in "Manhã de Carnaval," "there must be a day when you will return."

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