

Capturing Carnival: Religious Diversity and Spatial Contestation in Rio de Janeiro

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In the past two decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have criticized the modernist developmental framework that pictured religion and the city in anachronistic terms (Lanz and Oosterbaan 2016; Hancock and Srinivas 2008; Kong 2001; Orsi 1999). Contemporary urban shifts around the world have pushed religious manifestations to the forefront and have urged scholars to rethink the framework to analyse contemporary urban religion. Cities that were formerly described as “secular” in fact show (renewed) struggles and negotiations about the place of religion and ask us to reconsider our understanding of modern urbanity (AlSayyad 2011).

In the wake of these struggles it has become apparent that cities are not level playing fields that contain particular religious places as distinct yet equivalent islands of worship but rather that diverse religious practices and representations have strikingly different connections with national imaginations and public space. Though governmental regimes that enforce boundaries between private and public spheres frequently picture religion as “private matter” (Meyer and Moors 2006), in practice certain religious forms have maintained or have acquired a preferential position in relation to the nation and its representations (Bender 2012; Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999). Especially cities that are the locus of national monuments, statues, temples, and churches impose common notions of shared cultural and religious identities by way of various material manifestations. As a result, religious forms and practices leave different imprints on cityscapes, depending on their changing connections to national imagination, citizenship regimes, political struggle and commerce (Knott 2016; Oosterbaan 2014; Van der Veer 2015).

In light of the historical formations concerning religion and the nation, minority religions generally struggle to gain physical space for their practices

and they struggle to obtain a place in nationalist schemes and representations. Even in societies where religious diversity is protected by constitutional decrees, minority religious groups frequently encounter obstacles or even violence when they attempt to build shrines or temples or when they exercise their faith publicly (Kong and Woods 2016). Impediments to particular religious presence—such as the banning of buildings, processions, or gatherings—are strongly related to historical relations between certain religious (and ethnic) groups and nationality on the one hand and the problematization of other religious groups on the other. Nevertheless, because national manifestations shaped or influenced by specific religious traditions are frequently pictured as “cultural” manifestations—think of parades, for example—minority religious groups occasionally have a chance to participate in such manifestations and perform counter-hegemonic acts.

This chapter provides a case study of evangelical carnival parades in Rio de Janeiro in relation to the hegemonic position of Roman Catholicism and the growth of evangelical movements in Brazil. It will focus on the evangelical perception of Brazilian carnival and the ideas and practices of people who participate in evangelical parades. The analysis will show that urban evangelical parades should be understood in relation to the historical configurations that connect(ed) Roman Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religion to the Brazilian nation amongst others by way of carnival parades. This historical religio-national configuration greatly affects the evangelical perception of the urban carnivalesque time-space. Many evangelical groups regard the carnival as defiling the city and some blame the municipal government for this tarnishing. Consequently, evangelical carnival parades are not merely religio-spatial interventions in the strict sense; they should also be seen as political statements regarding the governance of the city in relation to its spiritual condition and as a form of counter-cultural politics. Last but not least, evangelical responses to the worldly carnival display how urban space is experienced bodily and demonstrate the roles that sound and music play in the constitution of that (religious) space.

Public parades, national belonging, and religious diversity

Urban parades frequently acquire a political character in the broad sense of the word because they draw attention to particular social groups and make visible that which might otherwise be restricted from view. David Garbin (2012), Saint-Blancat, and Cancellieri (2014) and Kim Knott (2016) convincingly argue that in/visibility is at the heart of the political struggles over the recognition of

(minority) religious groups. Public urban space, in the words of Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri (2014: 5) can be considered a “field of gazes, an arena of intervisibility among different actors.” Public space, as Nirwal Puwar (2004) has argued, cannot be regarded a neutral terrain of visual exchange, however. It is generally codified according to ethnic/racial and gender identities (bodies) with the result that certain bodies are pictured as accepted occupants of public space, whereas others become highly visible as “others.” According to Puwar, people that diverge from the norm are often perceived as “space invaders” and thus challenge implicit ethnic/racial and gender codifications of public space.

Codifications of public space are not only dependent on normalized ethnic/racial and gender identities but also on (trans)national and religious identities and, as such, public space is not only the site where struggles over local and national belonging take place but also the site where confirmations and contestations about the relations between nationality, ethnicity, and religion occur (Hatziprokopiou and Evergeti 2014).

Parades and processions can be considered special kinds of public spatial interventions because they are (spectacular) temporal-spatial performances—akin to other kinds of rituals—that are presented as extra-ordinary (Kong 2005). By no means suggesting that this spatio-temporal bracketing is necessarily or entirely subversive (see Gotham 2005), parades and processions thus offer actors theatrical spaces to represent social relations, ideologies, and cosmologies that might affirm and contest hegemonic notions of society.

David Garbin (2012), for example, shows how a Congolese Kimbanguist brass band, consisting of migrants, uses London’s New Year’s Day Parade to become visible and audible in the city and to present elements of their religious understanding of the world that contrasts with other secular or sacred ideologies in a superdiverse city. According to Garbin (2012: 444), the visibility of this Kimbanguist brass band “is bound up with a particular grammar of recognition in the British context and also operates as a counter-discourse to various dominant images and representations of Congo, Africa, Congolese, or Black youth.” Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri (2014) show how urban religious processions challenge taken-for-granted notions of public religion and national/ethnic belonging. Their analysis of the Filipino *Santacruzán* procession in Padua, Italy, shows clearly how existing cultural-religious traditions that are considered part of the local national Italian identity and heritage allow space for Filipino religious actors to parade publicly. While providing the authoritative framework in which similar yet different ethno-religious identities can become public, the Paduan Roman Catholic Church does not wholeheartedly embrace all of the

differences and, perhaps more importantly, in the eye of the native Italian public, the Filipino *Santacruzán* procession also confirms the otherness of the participating migrants.

Besides bringing to light the conflicting conjunctures of religion and nationality in the face of global migration, the work of Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri underscores that religious manifestations become public in diverse ways, depending on power struggles, moments, and contexts. Moreover, they show how existing cultural-religious traditions such as processions not only challenge or affirm the secular/sacred divide (Kong 2005) but also offer space to challenge local hegemonic understandings of religiousness within a particular tradition (in this case a Roman Catholic).

Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri (2014) and Garbin (2012), explicitly formulate their arguments in the context of the large-scale global migration flows and diasporic community formations that present demographic changes and challenge hegemonic understandings of public religion. However, migration is not the only driving force that pushes groups to search for public presence or that intensifies struggles in and over urban public domains in relation to religious diversity. Urban religious struggle is not only the result of (forced and voluntary) migration but also of on-site conversion and local religio-political transformation.

In the Brazilian context, widespread conversion to evangelical Christianity has led to urban interventions in relation to national festive traditions such as the carnival. Struggles to become publicly present and to occupy spaces in relation to hegemonic configurations have to be understood contextually—spatially and temporally—and that means that efforts to become public in urban settings differ greatly as different cities display varying calendars of sequential public manifestations (commemorations, festivities, celebrations). Some of these manifestations may have a distinctive local character but especially in large and/or capital cities such manifestations may have a profound national character and may be symbolically tied to the life of the nation as a whole. It is during those moments that connections between the nation and certain religions (and “cultures”) are established, confirmed, and contested.

Brazilian evangelical Christianity

In the past decades, Brazilian evangelical Christianity has grown tremendously and evangelical movements have progressively become part of the political Brazilian landscape.¹ Evangelical pastors have emerged as community leaders

and many evangelical candidates were elected during the last three democratic elections for municipal, state, and federal governments. The growth of evangelical churches in Brazil largely corresponds to its success in the rest of Latin America and in most other parts of the world. In Latin America evangelical groups have grown substantially since the 1980s, and in various parts of Africa Pentecostalism particularly has become one of the most popular types of Christianity.

While it is not uncommon to encounter evangelical churches in the city center and beach areas of Rio de Janeiro, most evangelical churches can be found in the periphery and in the favelas on the hillsides in the city.² Nevertheless Brazilian evangelical churches have become increasingly visible in the public domain, with the globally operating *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (IURD)³ as the forerunner. The IURD has built huge “cathedrals” in cities throughout the country and in Rio de Janeiro it has also made an effort to establish their churches in buildings in dense and lively neighborhoods, for instance in former theaters and cinemas that had lost their appeal.

Besides the IURD and older Pentecostal churches such as the *Assembléia de Deus*, other churches have also gained much attention in the public sphere. The *Igreja Internacional de Graça de Deus* has acquired much airtime in the past decades, for example—and new churches regularly rise to the urban surface—think of the *Bola de Neve Church* that attracts many youngsters or the *Comunidade Evangélica Sara Nossa Terra*. In Rio de Janeiro, an evangelical radio station Radio Melodia is the second most popular radio station of all broadcasters and the most popular among the youth.

The growth of evangelical churches and their appropriation of media channels have upset the hegemonic connections between Brazilian “culture,” the state, and religion (see also Birman and Lehmann 1999). For a long time, Brazil was considered one of the most Catholic countries in the world (Birman and Leite 2000).⁴ Several Brazilian scholars such as Patricia Birman (2003), Joaílto Burity (2011), Emerson Giumbelli (2014), and Paula Montero (2015), show how the categories *religião* (religion) and *laicidade* (secularity) played crucial roles in the restructuring of the governmental roles of the state and the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil and they investigate what this means for hegemonic understandings of religion in Brazilian public space. At the birth of the Brazilian republic in 1889, which introduced the political separation of church and state, the Brazilian Catholic Church strategically defined itself as the privileged partner of the state in several of its governmental projects. During the republican, dictatorial, and democratic periods of Brazil, Roman Catholicism was tightly

connected to national projects in such a way that its symbols and rites marked much of public life (see also Montes 1998; Sanchis 2001).

The advent of evangelical movements in Brazil, coinciding with other societal changes (Montero 2015), has led different actors to question and contest the public life of a number of religious manifestations (statues, symbols, icons, sounds, etc.) in public space (Oro et al. 2012). Instead of reducing such contestations to the question if Brazil is truly a “secular” country or not, I think it is much better to take up Giumbelli’s (2012: 60) invitation and investigate the various relations between public space and religious symbols to understand better the challenges that we are facing in our (re)thinking of democracy and (religious) pluralism (see also Oosterbaan 2017b).

Evangelical public presence and carnival

Besides broadcasts, evangelical churches have also organized evangelical manifestations and mass gatherings. The IURD has been able to gather multitudes in Brazilian arenas such as the famous soccer temple Maracanã in Rio de Janeiro but in the past decade other churches have also succeeded in gathering huge crowds. One phenomenon that stands out is the so-called *Marcha para Jesus* that is held yearly in various cities in Brazil. The marches, that have become a global phenomenon since the first March for Jesus was held in 1983 in Melbourne, Australia, have been held in Brazil since 1993. The Brazilian marches generally gather representatives of various evangelical churches, ranging from the Pentecostal to the Neo-Pentecostal. Strikingly, as a result of the efforts of Marcelo Crivella—a high-ranking leader of the IURD and at present mayor of Rio de Janeiro—the *Marcha para Jesus* day was recognized officially as a national Brazilian celebration day in 2009. Musical performances stand at the heart of the marches and besides its urban visibility, sonic presence is extremely important (Sant’Ana 2014). The *Marcha para Jesus* counts many so-called *trios elétricos*—trucks with loudspeakers—that amplify evangelical music and the parade generally ends at a huge stage where several acts take place.

Despite this growing presence of evangelical churches, evangelical practices were and still are commonly described as alien to Brazilian “culture” (see also Mafra 2011). Characterized by a cult of abstinence, which highlights certain types of earthly enjoyment as sinful, many elements of Brazilian life have been described as profane. Besides the conservative bodily regime, Pentecostal churches are generally characterized by their iconoclastic attitude that

enforces a break with cultural practices that are deemed unbiblical. As a result, Brazilian evangelical churches oppose many socio-religious practices that were/are portrayed as typically Brazilian. Afro-Brazilian religious worship and popular cultural expressions related to Afro-Brazilian life in particular are heavily demonized.

The *Marcha para Jesus* is an excellent example of an urban parade that symbolically and physically occupies urban space in order to claim a presence in nationalist schemes and representations. Nevertheless, this “national” celebration does not seem to be wholeheartedly embraced (yet) by the majority of Brazilians. This contrasts with other, more popular national urban events that also display global traces but are generally not regarded as evangelical at all. The most obvious example is the Rio de Janeiro carnival. Carnival is generally represented as one of the defining cultural characteristics of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro as one of the privileged places where this cultural trait is embodied and performed (DaMatta 1981; Pravaz 2008; Sheriff 1999). Whereas carnival can be full of religious connotations (Cavalcanti 2015; Costa 2007), it is generally not regarded as an explicit religious event, let alone a Protestant/evangelical event. Nevertheless, in Brazil, as elsewhere, it has been incorporated in the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar as the festivities that precede Lent.

Interestingly, in 2017, the *escola de samba* (samba school) *Unidos de Vila Maria* in São Paulo, collaborated intensively with the Roman Catholic Church, in accordance with the archbishop Odilo Pedro Scherer, to dedicate their annual parade at the São Paulo *sambódromo* to the patron saint of Brazil, *Nossa Senhora Aparecida* (Our Lady of Aparecida), in commemoration of the finding of the holy statue 300 years earlier (1717).⁵ Never before had the Brazilian Catholic Church participated in an annual parade. The Church did restrict the nudity that can be common at *sambódromo* parades and demanded pious treatment of the image of *Nossa Senhora Aparecida*.⁶

Insiders and outsiders know Brazilian carnival by the images of people parading during the televised performances in the famous *sambódromo* in Rio de Janeiro. However, there are also the less famous parades of so-called *blocos* (street parades) downtown. *Blocos* by and large make samba music and they generally consist of a group of percussionists and a *carro de som* (sound van)⁷ that amplifies the sound of the *cavaquinho* and the voices of the samba singers. Commonly, audiences join the parades.

As a result of complex entwinements between ideologies of *mestiçagem* and politics of authenticity, Brazilian carnival is often regarded as a collection of cultural repertoires that preserves and reproduces age-old Afro-Brazilian

practices and Afro-Brazilian religious conceptions. Moreover, these cultural repertoires have become important markers of Brazilian national identity.

It was particularly during and after the 1930s that samba and the carioca carnival became simultaneously identified both with images of an authenticating “blackness” (or even “Africanness”) and with those of the uniquely hybrid, “mixed” national culture of Brazil.

Sheriff 1999: 14

Though I cannot describe here the complexities of this social *imaginaire* and the important power struggles that are part of it, recognizing carnival as having pagan and Catholic connotations and as a space to exhibit Afro-Brazilian religious traditions (see Rocha and da Conceição Silva 2013) reproduces evangelical apprehension with regard to this national cultural tradition. In general, many evangelical churches regard carnival as highly immoral and stay away as far as possible from the celebrations. Many churches organize so-called retreats (*retiros*) outside the city for their members to offer them a substitute for the popular festivities in the city. However, during the past decades several evangelical churches in Brazil have gained visibility by partaking in the street carnival with evangelical blocos.

Capturing carnival

Two evangelical churches—*Projeto Vida Nova* (PVN) and *Comunidade Evangélica Internacional Zona Sul* (CEIZS)—organize blocos during the Rio de Janeiro carnival. Between the beginning of the 1990s and 2014 they held these parades at symbolically significant location in Rio de Janeiro: the *avenida Rio Branco* in the city center of Rio de Janeiro. From 2015 to 2017 the avenue was not used for carnival parades due to the urban renovations related to the 2016 Olympics, and in the foreseeable future the blocos will probably move to another grand avenue downtown—the *avenida de Chile*. Nevertheless, much can be learned from the evangelical blocos held during their parades at the Rio Branco Avenue, in particular the way participants recounted the meaning of their presence in spatio-temporal terms. Before describing and analysing this presence, let me introduce the two blocos.

Two blocos that paraded through the Rio Branco were the bloco *Mocidade Dependente de Deus* of the CEIZS, and the bloco *Cara de Leão* of the PVN. My interest in the parades is related to earlier research on religious transformation

in Brazil, particularly on the growth of Pentecostal communities in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (Oosterbaan 2008, 2009). As part of this research trajectory, I witnessed the parades of *CEIZS* in 2011 and those of the *PVN* in 2011, 2014, and 2016. In 2011, I interviewed *PVN* participants during and after the parade and in 2014 and 2016 I interviewed *PVN* members and leaders before, during, and afterwards.

Both churches—*PVN* and *CEIZS*—held their first blocos on the Rio Branco at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s. Since then, they have become widely known as the two evangelical churches that parade during carnival. Whereas they maintain cooperative relations, their backgrounds are different. The headquarters of the *CEIZS* is located at the *Praia do Flamengo* on the well-to-do south side, whereas the headquarters of the *PVN* is located in Irajá, a neighborhood in the peripheral northern zone of the city. The doctrines and practices of the *PVN* could be considered closer to Pentecostal styles of worship—with more emphasis on demonic presence than the *CEIZS*. I focused on the *PVN* because it has more churches in the metropolitan area than the *CEIZS* and because it regularly demonizes Afro-Brazilian religion.

The two evangelical churches discussed here have gained a reputation for a music genre that other churches deem spiritually tainted (samba enredo) but also for their parades in the “worldly” *carioca* street carnival along Rio Branco Avenue. As I witnessed during the parades, both evangelical blocos draw many people (see also Mesquita 2012), but in comparison to “worldly” blocos less than average. Interviews held during and after the *Cara de Leão* parades revealed that most participants and attendants are members of the *PVN* and congregate in *PVN* churches located in the northern zone of the city. They regard the parades as important yearly evangelical events that form the specific identity of their church. Participants generally consider themselves exceptional Christians because they do not leave the city for a spiritual retreat during the carnival and they regard the presence of their blocos as the only powerful counterforce against the evil powers that rule the city during carnival.

Both blocos that parade through the Rio Branco display the cultural style common to other carnival parades in Rio de Janeiro. The parades of *Cara de Leão* and *Mocidade Dependente de Deus* consist of different *alas* (subsections) that are headed by a *mestre-sala* (master of the room—masculine) and *porta-bandeira* (flag carrier—feminine). As in regular *sambódromo* parades, the *mestre-sala* and the *porta-bandeira* represent a couple dressed in carnivalesque gala costumes. The percussion section (*bateria*) of the parades precedes the *carro de som* that carries the cavaquinho player and the samba singer. The percussion

section, largely made up of adolescent church members, produces the typical samba enredo sound as boys and girls hit their *surdos* (bass drums) and *tamborins* (small-frame drums) in synchronous fashion.

Despite the similarity in form, both evangelical churches stress how they differ from the non-evangelical blocos. During the preparatory PVN church services in 2014 and 2016 where I was present, pastors of different congregations instructed the members that they were not about to parade (*desfile*) to celebrate carnival but to evangelize. The pastors instructed their audience to leave the location as soon as the parade finished to demonstrate they were not there to participate in the carnival. During the parade, church members formed two long lines holding hands on each side of the parade, separating the participants from the audience. A member explained that this *cordão de isolamento* (cordon of isolation) signals that people are not invited to join the parade and to dance along (as in other blocos) but to witness it and hear the church's message. The cordão thus serves as the boundary to secure the parade's status as a spiritual intervention that critically engages with carnival as a sinful "feast of the flesh" without becoming part of it. Spatially speaking, the cordão demarcates the boundary between the blessed parade and "the city" and thus creates a ritual space-time within a broader ritual space-time (the Rio de Janeiro carnival) (see Schechner 2003; Turner 1982). We will return to the evangelical perception of this broader ritual space-time below.

Participants of the blocos collectively sing evangelical samba songs written especially for the parades and helpers hand out flyers with the lyrics so audiences can sing along. The flyers of the bloco *Mocidade Dependente de Deus* of 2011 featured the samba lyrics along with the following critique of the common understanding of carnival as a time for fun: "There is a happiness that does not depend on four days of carnival, or on costumes. It is real. Jesus Christ is the source of true happiness. To experience it, you need only to believe. Come and visit us to learn more about this happiness." Similarly, a flyer of the bloco *Cara de Leão* distributed in 2011 read:

If carnival's happiness could fulfill someone, it would not end with such a sad and silent day as Ash Wednesday. What good are the 4 days of fun when the same problems continue without solution during the other 361 days? (...) Dear friend, don't waste any more time, remove the mask of illusion and clothe yourself with the love of God and present your life to Jesus Christ, the fountain of genuine and eternal joy!

Elsewhere, I have analysed why *CEIZS* and *PVN* describe the appropriation of the music genre samba enredo as *estratégia* (strategy) and why they propose to

sharply differentiate musical form (rhythm) and lyrical content (Oosterbaan 2017b). In another text, I analyse their employment of the “culture” concept to describe evangelical practices as part and parcel of the Brazilian nation and to counter the recurrent accusation that evangelicals are un-Brazilian. Both of these texts help to clarify how evangelicals manage to incorporate carnivalesque traditions that have been and are often described as malevolent and immoral by other evangelical groups.

Here I want to emphasize the spatio-temporal character of the evangelical parades. The evangelical blocos can be described as performative events that seek to reflect and comment on carnival while (partly) participating in it and as concrete spiritual interventions that temporarily bring “order” to a space that is (also temporarily) left over to malevolent spiritual forces. The city is thus not merely the background where these performances are played out but the symbolic, material, and sensory world where these cultural practices become meaningful in relation to power and daily life. One participant of the bloco *Cara de Leão*, clarified that it was very important their church did not leave the city for a spiritual retreat during the carnival but decided to hold their parade in the middle of the carnival festivities. As he explained:

We do not agree with this, with the carnival. It is a disgrace. Our mayor has handed over the keys to the city to King Momo and the authorities turn their backs on the city. Instead of doing the same, we come here the show that this is merely a celebration of the flesh which only leads to death.

King Momo, a figure derived from Greek mythology, symbolically receives command over the city during the carnival, an event that marks the beginning of carnival and is broadcast widely in Rio de Janeiro. For the adherents of evangelical churches such a symbolic act is taken quite literally since it is closely tied to a general perception that the city is handed over to evil forces while the authorities and other evangelical churches do nothing. Rei Momo is not seen as a playful character whose metaphorical reign marks the ritual time of the carnival but as the personification of a malevolent spiritual entity.

As a congregant said during an interview in 2014:

The mayor hands over keys to this entity (*entidade*) and this is an evil entity, it is an entity that leads people to a life of the flesh that carnival brings. During carnival people catch diseases, people die in traffic accidents because they get drunk, people die as result of silly personal clashes; in the midst of the festivities people start arguing and one pulls a knife and kills the other.

For PVN members handing over the keys to the city to Rei Momo means transforming a perilous city into a space of demonic presence. Consequently, the *Cara de Leão* parades are seen not only as a form of evangelization but also as a benevolent spatial intervention. For instance, while consecrating the bloco, a preacher of the PVN reminds the performers why their task is so important when he turns to God and prays:

I ask of you Lord to glorify this place by means of the lives of your children; they are here looking at You for perfection for those days that Satan wants to take this city by assault, Lord we are there to minister your Word, to clarify that this city is not marvelous because of the carnival, that this city is not marvelous because of the beauty of her natural resources, this is a marvelous city because Jesus Christ is the Lord. Holy Spirit, we start these rehearsals, declaring that we depend on You, we are going to enter the Rio Branco depending on You Lord.⁸

The consecration of the bloco is to be understood in light of the idea that the presence and movement of the bloco through the Rio Branco presents a powerful counterforce against the evil forces that reign in the inner city during carnival. On one of its websites, a representative of the church explains that since 2011 they adopted a new strategy to send forth a group of thirty people to stop evil spirits along the Rio Branco from interfering with the bloco. Especially near the end of the parade, when the bloco reaches the *Praça Floriano*, a large square, church adherents had experienced opposition and maltreatment. According to Marcos Campos, one of the leaders of the church:

To send forth members of the bloco to the Praça Floriano was a revelation of God, because that is a place of friction. Before, when the bloco arrived, the people there were listening to other kinds of music; there was a certain physical and spiritual discomfort, even physical aggression. This time we sent forth people to plow the earth, preparing the terrain by means of individual approaches. We entered the enemy's territory, destroying the fortresses. The result was really good. When the bloco arrived there were many people waiting to participate in the prayer.⁹

The words of Marcos Campos display a shared notion of bodily and spiritual occupation of the city. The *Praça Floriano* square sits in front of the well-known municipal theater where normally different carnivalesque groups encounter each other and dissolve into a larger crowd. For the PVN this is not yet the moment to leave the location but rather the moment to begin the grand finale of the evangelical event. After having stopped the parade, leaders of the church generally take this moment to address the crowd gathered around the *carro de*

som accompanied by evangelical music of a different musical genre. Here, not samba enredo but pop ballads provide the melodic undertone meant to move the public emotionally and spiritually. Generally speaking, this type of gospel music sharply contrasts with the music that reverberates in the carnivalesque cityscape as it does not persuade people to dance ecstatically but rather enforces a melancholic emotional mood, characteristic of many evangelical events.

In 2011, for example, pastors preached loudly with the song “*Faz um Milagre em Mim*” (Create a Miracle in Me) of gospel singer Regis Danese as background music. During the prayer (*oração*), one pastor invited all people present at the square—dressed up (*fantasiada*) or not—to receive God’s blessing. After the emotional prayer, another pastor took the microphone and vociferously requested God to make of Rio de Janeiro a peaceful city that would acquire salvation: “We declare (*declaramos*) that this city and our state belong to Lord Jesus!” Both the emotionally loaded evangelization and the “declaration” should be understood in relation to the political undertone of these events, I would argue. Both in 2011 and 2014, I witnessed how the pastors used the final moment of the event at the end of the parade to bless the “authorities”—ranging from the nation’s president to the mayor of Rio de Janeiro and the controversial military police of the state of Rio de Janeiro. In my view, such blessings and “declarations” should be read in relation to powerful claims that only evangelical churches can save the nation and the city from its perilous worldly and spiritual enemies, something that I frequently heard over the years.

The evangelical struggles to be recognized as allied with the Brazilian authorities are reflected in the common understandings of the location of the Rio Branco parades in relation to a topography of power. The *Praça Floriano* is located at an arm’s length of the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro. In an interview I held with several adherents of the church after the parade in 2011, they explained it was very important to hold the parades in the center of the city because the city center is also the center of power of Rio de Janeiro. According to one participant I interviewed in 2011, the center (Rio Branco avenue) is the heart of governmental power where decisions concerning the city and Brazilian society are made and for that reason it is important to perform the bloco “right there at the heart.” In 2014, another congregant I interviewed stated:

With carnival we go to the centre of the city to demonstrate the glory of God, to propose in the heart of city that which we want for our city, which is the liberation of this malediction that we know as carnival. The majority of the protests and manifestations are held in the city centre, it is in the centre where the revolutions

take place. When we head for the centre, where carnival takes place, we enter a spiritual battle.

Such an understanding of power and geography of the city is partly understandable from the perspective of the locations of the evangelical churches and the residence of their members. While it is not uncommon to encounter evangelical churches in the city center of Rio de Janeiro, most evangelical churches can be found in the periphery and in the favelas on the hillsides in the city. For this and other reasons, evangelical churches were considered a rather marginal phenomenon for a time, yet, during the last fifteen to twenty years, they have progressively become part of the social and political landscape of the city and the country at large.

The people who perform in and support the *PVN* carnival performances generally live in the peripheral areas of the city and collectively come to parade in the city center. In doing so, people momentarily upset the religious majority-minority relations that are reflected in the urban topography and that intersect with urban class relations. It appears that people not only recognize that “power” is located in the city center but also that power has historically been associated with Roman Catholicism. Moreover, but not surprisingly, many evangelicals hold the ruling authorities co-responsible for the evil that reigns the city during carnival, a feeling that intensifies the moment the mayor hands over the key to the city to King Momo.

Strikingly, but entirely in line with current religio-political transformations in Brazil, the current mayor of Rio de Janeiro—Marcelo Crivella, nephew of the leader of the IURD—did not perform the ritual handing over of the key to Rei Momo at the start of the 2017 carnival of Rio de Janeiro. Without giving notice why exactly he broke with the tradition—accept that his wife was having the flu—the key was handed over by the municipal secretary of culture Nilcemar Nogueira at the *sambódromo* instead of at the Palácio da Cidade (the mayor’s office) in the neighborhood Botafogo.¹⁰ It will remain speculation but it is highly likely that this was a conscious decision to avoid controversy within evangelical circles.

Concluding remarks

The desire to take part in the street carnival of Rio de Janeiro (without becoming part of it) should be understood as part of wider incorporations of popular cultural practices and products in Brazilian evangelical culture (Cunha 2007;

Oosterbaan 2017a; Rivers 2016), but also in relation to the socio-economic positions of Pentecostal and evangelical groups in the city and the imagined topography of power. The layered identification of carnival as the high point of Brazilianness, displaying the Afro-Brazilian and Catholic roots of the nation, fuels the evangelical opposition to this particular depiction of carnival but simultaneously makes it a very attractive domain to wage a spiritual battle and to produce new religious subjectivities with the help of music and sound. Attention to the evangelical carnival parades shows how evangelical adherents perceive and experience the ritual space-time of the Rio de Janeiro carnival and how they construct and experience their own parades as a powerful urban counterforce. Moreover, they regard the parades as components of a larger struggle to conquer space in representations of the Brazilian nation. This struggle should be understood in relation to the hegemonic understanding of Brazilian “culture” as firmly embedded in a Catholic/Afro-Brazilian religious past (Prandi 2008), yet in tense relation to evangelical practices that are often not pictured as part of the “uniquely hybrid, ‘mixed’ national culture of Brazil.”

