

# OLINDA WANTS TO SING: CARNIVALESQUE EXPRESSIONS OF A CITY WITHOUT CARNIVAL

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DOSSIER WORLDS IN PERFORMANCE: 20 YEARS  
NAPEDRA

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PHOTOGRAPH 1

## INTRODUCTION

The audiovisual language is used in anthropology as a possible path of elaboration and dissemination of ethnographic research. The insertion of the recording of images in Anthropology was concretized with the perspective that the Culture of a people is not only

present in its artifacts, but in its habits, values, and behaviors. In its first decades, this approach was guided by the rationalist understanding that images could bring greater objectivity to data collection (Barbosa and Cunha 2006, 8). “According to this perspective, gestures, speeches, movements, and expressions could be preserved in films, as well as clay pots and masks are preserved”. It was believed that the use of images by Anthropology would translate better than words the accuracy, truth, and reality itself. However, in this study, they represent more than that. To be seized in their entirety, the images I bring count on the emotion of the lovers who have long been nostalgic for that carnival, although you (almost) do not see any revelry in the proportions that the city usually sees at this period of the year.

In this study, I bring photographs taken in upper Olinda, in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil during the Carnival (or what would be) period, canceled in 2022 for the second consecutive year by the city hall due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The feeling generated over walking through the streets that would be in my own itinerary of the four days of King Momo celebrations was that of nostalgia for future things, longing for something I know and crave to know again every year, presence and absence at the same time. The role of photography, according to Sylvia Caiuby Novaes (2014), is precisely to instigate the sight, implicating it in its denaturalization: the empty slope-streets are full of something different from the traditional crowds. In this sense, photography is not a faithful portrait of reality since its meaning is built in the dialogue of its shape (how one photographs and how the photographs are then displayed) and its content (what is photographed) with the subjective baggage of who photographs it (the anthropologist-photographer) and who interprets it (the recipient). “It is the eloquent silence of the images that we can bring to our discipline, with everything that, in their own way, the photographs have to say” (Caiuby Novaes 2014, 64).

For David MacDougall (1997), visual means differ from a verbal text because the latter is built by a *process* of description, and the former allow knowledge to happen by familiarization. In other words, according to Fabiene Gama (2016), the images count on those who will observe them to communicate their truths and their senses, relying on the growing reflection within Anthropology on the space that the perception, affections, and senses take in the production of ethnographic knowledge:

There are different levels of interpretation, which happen simultaneously in a denotative way — pointing to the information present in the image — and connotative — pointing to several other implicit and symbolic information —, and which are of a perceptive (immediate), cognitive (related


to cultural baggage or personal experience) and ideological or ethical (related to values) orders. This means that the same image can be interpreted differently by people who have different knowledge about the photographed subject. (Gama 2016, 119)

Anticipating some different interpretation experiences — those who are familiar with the carnival in this city and those who are not —, I divided the photographs into three other sections, each having verbal texts that help the images transmit the lived experience. With this, I seek to draw attention to the assembly of this work and expose it as a construction method of this report. According to Samain (2012), the image is a “memory of memories”, a “form that thinks”, and, in this text, the assembly, chromatic choices, and ordinations were thought to enrich the perception of a subjective experience. Essentially, each section covers most of the meanings attributed to image groups. Furthermore, the colors in the images are absent or quite faded towards black, white, and gray, aiming to contrast the colorful, rich, and multisensory experience of first-person practice and keep the melancholy of the non-carnival visible. The criterion behind the difference between few colors or no colors is the intensity of memory associated with each imagetic content.

The idea of a festive period in the year marked by “inversions” originates in the old European continent and arrived in Brazil during colonization. Slowly, the party was adapted to the specific social reality found here: the Portuguese *entrudo* — a widespread revelry in the streets where each person/group experiences/makes it in their own fashion — have been known to be the celebration with greater popular participation of popular people taking to the streets and, after the emergence of Zé Pereira<sup>1</sup>, it has contributed to the origin of the street block parties (Ferreira *apud* Baribiere, Gonçalves e Menezes Neto 2022); and, in its turn, the Venetian masquerade balls were imported to differentiate the elite parties from the street parties (Lopes Junior 2019), easily allowing us today to associate them with the “cabinization” (“*camarotização*”<sup>2</sup>) of the Carnival event — it regards the widespread tendency of selling a ticket to fenced, elitist, and air-conditioned spaces in the middle of the people’s revelry — which we

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1. The popularization of the character of ‘Zé Pereira’, who gives his name to the carnival Saturday, dates to the 19th century, and it is still surrounded by many uncertainties and divergences among historians. However, most of them seem to agree that the name regards the Portuguese man José Nogueira de Azevedo Paredes, a shoemaker who decided to take to the streets during the days of carnival playing a tambour. In the following years, other instruments and their players joined the type of revelry inaugurated by José Nogueira. Some historians even argue that it was from this demonstration that the street blocks emerged. Of the giant dolls — traditional carnival figures in Pernambuco — Zé Pereira’s is the oldest in the state, currently over 100 years old. It is uncertain about how Zé Nogueira became Zé Pereira. For more details, access <<https://tribunadosertao.com.br/noticias/2016/02/06/26731-sabado-de-ze-pereira-misterios-sobre-o-dono-sabado-de-carnaval>>  
2. On the subject, consult Franco and Souza Leão 2018.



easily find in Olinda. In that city, the Carnival takes place traditionally on the streets, although it has several other more or less popular models of revelry besides the elite spaces and popular festivities. Ordinary citizens form the revelry blocks that make the streets absolutely crowded with revelers, cheering the crowd by shouting known frevo<sup>3</sup> music to all, leading all to shared inebriation.

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, shortly after the 2020 Carnival, and with the need for social isolation, we began to organize ourselves in different ways, avoiding agglomerations: livestreams and broadcasts on *Youtube* and *Facebook*: our parties had gone digital. With the cancellation of the 2021 Carnival, we noticed in many parts of the country that some parties, initiatives, and even King Momo celebrations went to the screens (Sá Gonçalves 2021). Some of the most traditional Olinda's citizens' revelry blocks made their parades and celebrations remotely. They usually had the traditional giant dolls from the state carnival, frevo orchestras, frevo dancers (*passistas de frevo*), hosts, and traditional banners of a festival of colors. But no audience was allowed<sup>4</sup>.

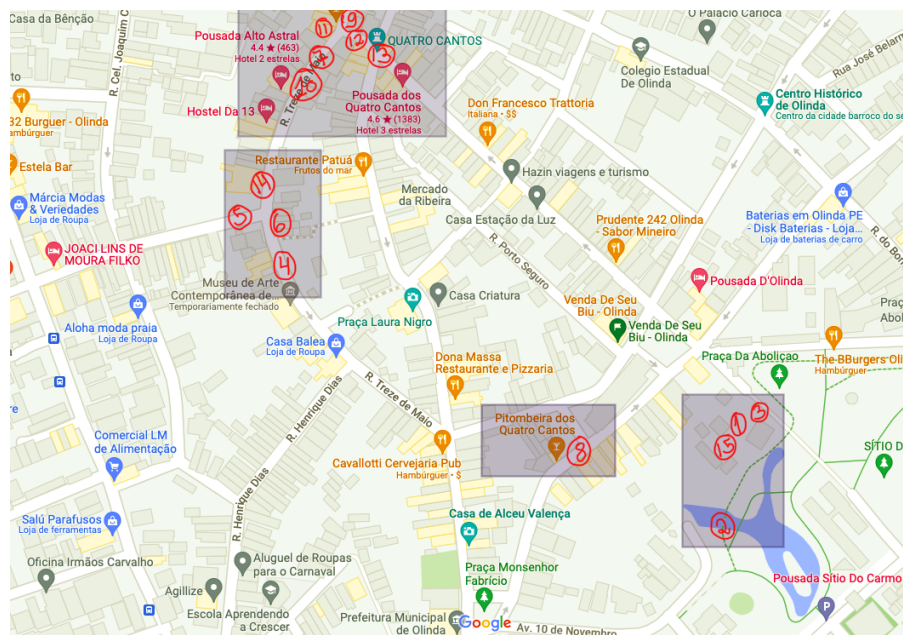
In 2022, year of the images in this essay, it was still possible to observe some manifestations of the so-called “digital carnival”, but the return to the streets had already begun, as we will see in the following pages, albeit timidly. It is in this sense that the photographs dialogue with the memory of what should be, causing a displacement to another moment, besides what was photographed, especially among those who have already lived any carnival in the slope-streets of Olinda, an event that strongly affects the lives of all who have known it, whether they like the agglomerated revelry under the fervor of the sun marking at least 35°C. For people unfamiliar with this carnival and these streets, the texts that precede each set of photographs will help recognize the missing elements and instigate with the images the will to (re)visit those streets when they are finally properly crowded again. The sequence of photos we will see was thought with the objective of presenting the permanent presence of Olinda's population in their carnival with artistic interventions that allude to the popular festival; to refer to the similar but not same feelings of longing and nostalgia that occupy those empty streets; and, finally, point out some carnival persistences, whether they are sanitarily responsible in the context of the pandemic or the kind of agglomerations that bring risk of contamination, even if the party is in its reduced size, restricted to some of the most popular places of the previous carnivals.

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3. Musical style with hallucinating rhythm and dance steps inspired by capoeira that since 2012 has been considered an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by Unesco.

4. That was the case for these Carnival street blocks: [O Homem da Meia-Noite](#), [Troça Carnavalesca Mista Cariri Olindense](#), [Boi da Macuca](#), [Pitombeira dos Quatro Cantos](#). Notice Hyperlink of the broadcasts when available on *Youtube*.

Before we follow, I bring below a map of part of the upper city with the identification of the place where each photo, identified by its order of presentation, was taken:



**IMAGE 1**

Map of photographs in Cidade Alta/Olinda (PE). Source: Google Maps.

## **HINO DO ELEFANTE [“ELEPHANT’S HYMN”]: THE CONSTANT DIALOGUE BETWEEN OLINDA AND ITS CARNIVAL**

My first stop was at *Praça do Carmo* (Carmo Square). Had it been Carnival, it would be full of food stalls, street vendors selling chocolates, water, soft drinks and beer; tapes and props would be coloring the whole city; frevo would be playing aloud while being danced magnificently on a stage set up in the square. It is the same stage as the official opening and closing of King Momo festivities in Olinda. In the previous Saturday of Zé Pereira, however, few things indicated that we should be partying. The longing, however, seemed to be heard in the wind, which, without the crowding multitude of people to stop it, hit my face far more often and strongly.

I could hear the frevo music of yesteryear in my imagination if I closed my eyes. The title of each section, starting with this, takes the name of famous frevo music and wagers on a multisensory reading experience, seeking to answer the question raised by Alexsânder Nakaóka Elias (2019, 268) about the possibility of including in the ethnographic text “other important cultural elements related to the group and/or community”. In this line, my proposal is a synesthetic experience, as Elias did in his

thesis. And, although empty, it was possible to observe a city that loves its carnival. The manifestations of Olinda's intimacy with the celebration were tattooed, assimilated, incorporated into the everyday life of the city. The titles contain a hyperlink to listen to the respective frevo music on *Youtube*, which was already used in the title of this section.



PHOTOGRAPH 2



PHOTOGRAPH 3



PHOTOGRAPH 4

### **ÚLTIMO REGRESSO [“LAST RETURN”]: THE SENSE OF EMPTINESS**

Soon, my legs would take me to the place where I spend most of my hours of carnival revelry. 13 (“treze”) de Maio Street — more easily recognized as “fag street” (“rua dos frangos”), a stronghold of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transvestites, transgender people, and sexually curious people during the carnival days — is at the end of a considerable climb from the perimeter closer to the upper town. Spotting it means that we are close to the party and *success*. Usually, when my group and I arrive, we turn to the right and squeeze ourselves into a space where the chains of people moving in different directions do not carry us in an unintended one. Being able to move freely, being able to observe the steps of the staircase of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC), observe the absence of vending tents competing for space with people, the absence of people hooking up, with no one drunk or falling. Something was missing. Everything was missing. That day, the *Treze* was the residential street it usually is on every single day that it’s not Carnival.

In a quick conversation with the receptionist of The Auto-Astral Inn, Hoseana, I’ve learned that music was discouraged by public instances — or even prohibited, according to her — in the traditional areas of Olinda’s Carnival. That meant no frevo music on the slope-streets. According to Hoseana, one could freely put on some Brazilian country music near the beach, however. The measure sought to avoid excited passers-by to crowd

the slopes, due to the danger that the pandemic still represented. Cars from the Military Police of the Independent Tourist Support Company (CIATur) and municipal inspection could be seen frequently, ready to disperse any beginnings of agglomeration and partying intentions. The silence echoed and made the longing hurt. The images that follow burn, as Didi-Huberman (2012, 216) proposes, for playing with the senses, for transporting one to another moment in space/time, for making the urgency felt, “By its untimely movement, incapable as it is to stop on the way (as they say “burn steps”), capable as it is to always bifurcate, to go abruptly to the other part (as they say “burn the courtesy”; take French leave)”.



**PHOTOGRAFY 5**





PHOTOGRAFY 6



PHOTOGRAFY 7



PHOTOGRAFY 8

### **MADEIRA DE LEI: [“HARDWOOD”] “IF IT HAD HAPPENED, I WOULD NOT RESIST IT”**

As much as the city hall and the state government had set up a structure to discourage the party, among many the desire to participate in the Carnival spoke louder. By talking with the surrounding residents, I found that both on Friday and on Saturday (February 26 and 27, 2022) the slope-streets were full, from late afternoon to night. Adapting to this information, on Sunday, I arrived at 13 de Maio Street late in the afternoon and witnessed the beginning of the agglomeration that would be reported in local newspapers the following day.

It is not by far possible to compare what was seen only during the weekend with the carnival that those slope-streets are used to. The crowd I witnessed focused on the *Quatro Cantos* (Four Corners), as illustrated on the next page. Walking while maintaining social distancing was difficult, but far from impossible. Meanwhile, military police could be seen doing what can only be described as public safety, since four people were insufficient to even try to disperse the large group of people who occupied the space.

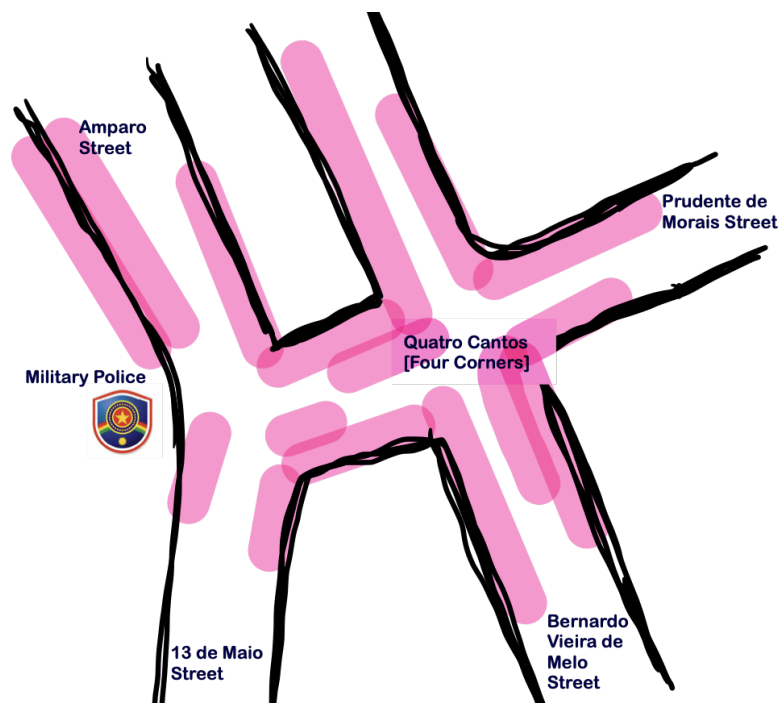
However, it cannot be said that the carnival passed without a party on the slope-streets of Olinda or that carnival demonstrations could not be seen in the form of costumes, props, and glitter. As I walked closer to

photograph giant dolls that were “sitting” on a pickup truck, I heard a group of three people talking casually in front of a house:

Woman: (...) because if it[Carnival] had happened, I wouldn't resist it.

Resident: I just didn't go to the beach because there would be nothing, since I wasn't going to be able to resist either. It's way too good! (FIELD DIARY, 02/27/22)

Although in smaller proportions, the frevo music could be heard at dusk without closing one's eyes: one of the residents placed a huge speaker in the window of her house at “Treze”, while drinking beer with two other people, by a table she placed on the other side of the street. “The police passes by, they stare, but as not many people are here, they do nothing,” Rafael explained to me. He, his mother, and his friend/resident cheered the carnival in a carnival place during carnival hours, even without a proper carnival. A child who passed with his mother rehearsed some frevo steps and Margarida, Rafael's mother stated: “That's it, my girl. It's in the blood of every Olinda resident.”



#### DRAWING 1

Locating the Agglomeration.  
Source: own authorship.  
Material use: iPad and a Pencil iPad WB



PHOTOGRAPH 9



PHOTOGRAPH 10



PHOTOGRAPH 11



PHOTOGRAPH 12



PHOTOGRAPH 13



PHOTOGRAPH 14

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PHOTOGRAPH 15

#### ABSTRACT

In Olinda, Pernambuco, Brazil, during its most festive month, revelers take to the streets with lots of glitter and bodies on display. Not even an inch of distance between people can be seen, and it is very common to observe, in some way, how the quick passionate kisses exchanged between strangers manage to further diminish such distance. The assembly of this study has as a double objective to show the streets of the imagined route for the Carnival of Olinda in 2022; and, from the absence of bodies and revelry, canceled for the second consecutive year by the city hall, reflect on the meanings of the party for the city. In other words, this article shows the records, with photographs, of the non-carnival, of the non-kisses, of the non-crowd, as well as the resistances and insurances on keeping the flame of the revelry alive, with photographs of the route evoked by the memory of past carnivals.

#### KEYWORDS:

Anthropology and  
Image; Carnival;  
Pandemics;  
Olinda-PE.

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