

ARTICLES

STREET CARNIVAL IN THE PORT DISTRICT OF RIO DE JANEIRO: WHO CAN “TURN THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN” AND WHERE? A CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE FESTIVE PHENOMENON IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEOLIBERAL CITY

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the paradox inherent in the festive use of certain urban spaces by privileged social groups. Although the festive phenomenon is commonly associated with joy and transgression, its analysis cannot be understood apart from the social and spatial contexts in which it takes place. The example of street Carnival in the port district of Rio de Janeiro demonstrates how this festivity can be instrumentalized to symbolically distinguish the territory and advance the gentrification objectives of the Porto Maravilha urban operation. Thus, the article proposes a critical approach to the festive phenomenon in the contemporary urban context by considering festivities in the city as a space-time embedded in the neoliberal logics of the production of space.

Keywords

Right to the City; Inequality and Sociospatial Segregation; Spatial Justice; Festive City; Street Carnival; Port Area; Rio de Janeiro.

ARTIGOS

CARNAVAL DE RUA NA REGIÃO PORTUÁRIA DO RIO DE JANEIRO: QUEM PODE “VIRAR O MUNDO” E ONDE? UMA ABORDAGEM CRÍTICA DO FENÔMENO FESTIVO NO CONTEXTO DA CIDADE NEOLIBERAL

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Resumo

Este artigo tem por objetivo analisar o paradoxo inerente à ocupação festiva de determinados espaços urbanos por grupos sociais privilegiados. Embora o fenômeno festivo seja comumente associado à alegria e à transgressão, sua análise não pode ser dissociada dos contextos sociais e espaciais nos quais se insere. O exemplo do Carnaval de rua na região portuária do Rio de Janeiro evidencia como a festa pode ser instrumentalizada para distinguir simbolicamente o território e atender aos objetivos de gentrificação da operação urbana Porto Maravilha. Assim, propõe-se uma abordagem crítica do fenômeno festivo no contexto urbano contemporâneo, ao considerar a festa na cidade como um espaço-tempo imerso nas lógicas de produção neoliberal do espaço.

Palavras-chave

Direito à Cidade; Desigualdade e Segregação Socioespacial; Justiça Espacial; Cidade Festiva; Carnaval de Rua; Região Portuária; Rio de Janeiro.

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Introduction

Launched in 2009, the Porto Maravilha urban operation in the port district of Rio de Janeiro aimed to “revitalize” the area. Associated with processes of devalorization and revalorization of urban space, this large-scale urban operation may be understood as a planned, state-led gentrification project (López-Morales, 2019). Indeed, the municipality of Rio de Janeiro implemented deliberate interventionist policies aimed at making the area more attractive and replacing the resident population with one that was more affluent (Galiza, 2015; Ribeiro, 2016; Smith, 2003). These measures brought consequences for the land sector, involving a shift from regulatory to exception-based urban planning (Vainer, 2011),¹ and led to evictions, in which hundreds of families were displaced and deprived of their rights (Ximenes; Sant’Anna, 2018). In addition, these policies began to associate urban development within the operation’s perimeter with financial dynamics whose underlying logics are at odds with the conception of the city as a collective good (Giannella; Mian, 2019).

1. Administered by the Companhia de Desenvolvimento Urbano da Região do Porto do Rio de Janeiro (CDURP), a mixed-capital company that was replaced in 2022 by the Companhia Carioca de Parcerias e Investimentos (CCPar), the operation required modifications to the city’s master plan and the creation of a Special Area of Urban Development Interest (AEIU). The AEIU covers an area of 500 hectares and encompasses the neighborhoods of Saúde, Gamboa, and Santo Cristo (including the favelas of Morro da Providência, Pinto, São Diogo, and Pedra Lisa), as well as parts of the neighborhoods of Centro, Caju, São Cristóvão, and Cidade Nova.

Although Porto Maravilha is considered the most important public-private partnership in Brazil, various economic, political, and financial factors have discouraged private investment in the initiative, thereby contributing to its stagnation (Werneck; Novaes; Santos Junior, 2018). Most of the tower blocks constructed over recent years remain underutilized or even vacant. However, the slowdown in new constructions has not prevented the development of artistic, cultural, or festive activities in the area. On the contrary, over the past decade, these activities have continued to intensify in Rio de Janeiro's former port district (Mendes; Wanis; Cretton, 2019).

Culture, art, and festive activities have become instruments for reshaping the social and symbolic dimensions of the port district, while increasing its visibility nationally and internationally. In addition to the construction of major contemporary art museums, such as the Museu do Amanhã (Museum of Tomorrow) and the Museu de Arte do Rio (Rio Art Museum) and the development of urban art projects, such as the Museu de Arte Urbana do Porto (Port Urban Art Museum), which brings together more than fifty murals, a range of festive and cultural events are regularly organized in indoor and outdoor spaces, including street Carnival celebrations. The programming of these events is guided by the aim of catering to the cultural values and desires of potential "gentrifiers", i.e., groups with high levels of social, symbolic, or economic capital. Defined by Zukin as the "critical infrastructure" of gentrification (Zukin, 1991), this dynamic contributes to the denial, or even erasure, of the local sociocultural environment.

More precisely, in recent years, street Carnival has grown considerably in Rio's port district. In this article, I seek to describe the social and spatial dynamics associated with this growth. I examine how this festive phenomenon has developed in the port district both "from above" and "from below", giving rise to relations of social and spatial domination between those who benefit from the festivities and the local population. Despite its festive and marginal character, to what extent can street Carnival contribute to the production of an exclusionary space? My aim is to show that it is not street Carnival itself that generates dynamics of exclusion, but rather the fact that it takes shape and evolves as a space of public sociability (Souza, 2022; Simmel, 2006) influenced by the intentions and representations that underlie the production of the space it occupies. In this sense, I consider public authorities to be stakeholders in the dynamics that produce gentrification and, by drawing on Smith (2003), conceptualize street Carnival as a political strategy.

After outlining my methodological approach, I will show, more broadly, how the promotion of Rio's festive character forms part of a wider political strategy aimed at shaping the city according to the model of the "international city"

(Berry-Chikhaoui; Deboulet; Roulleau-Berger, 2007). I will then briefly trace the historical relationship between street Carnival and Rio's central neighborhoods, as well as its evolution since the early 2000s. Beyond the institutionalization of street Carnival, its expansion from the South Zone to the port district has been encouraged by a political agenda aimed at gentrifying the area by transforming it into a cultural and festive space of reference within the city. I will then describe how the Rio de Janeiro City Government has instrumentalized street Carnival to exercise its power of "positioning". Whether official or not, Carnival events are promoted or tolerated primarily according to the symbolic, social, and economic capital of the public that occupies the urban space. Finally, I will show how this instrumentalization of Carnival festivities in Rio's port district has contributed to the production of an exclusionary space in which social and spatial relations of domination are perpetuated.

1. Methodology

This article continues the reflections developed in my doctoral dissertation on contestations of urban revitalization projects (Sézérat, 2020). It draws on fieldwork data collected in Rio de Janeiro's port district between 2015 and 2025, a decade during which the city was marked by numerous social, economic, political, and public health crises. These data shed light on the highly precarious and unequal nature of the development of the Porto Maravilha operation and, more broadly, on the mechanisms and limits of the neoliberal city (Brenner; Marcuse; Mayer, 2009; Harvey, 1989).

The methodology employed in this article is based in part on "observant participation" (Soulé, 2007), insofar as I live in Rio de Janeiro's South Zone and have participated as a musician in street Carnival since 2013. More specifically, as a member of a Rio-based brass band (*fanfarra*)² from 2014 to 2018, I participated in Rio de Janeiro's "neofanfarrista" musical movement, described by Snyder as "an alternative governance to that of the Olympic city" (Snyder, 2022, p. 14). In recent years, I have observed how the locations chosen by the Carnival *blocos*³ I attend have gradually shifted from the city's South Zone to the port district. Outside the Carnival period, I have also observed how, for residents of the South Zone, attending a festive or cultural event organized in the port district, whether at a

2. A Brazilian brass band, typically featuring percussion, often associated with Carnival and other street festivities.

3. Bloco: a group of people (of widely varying size) who parade together during Carnival. Each bloco has its own musical repertoire and aesthetic style. They may bring together groups of friends, residents of the same neighborhood, members of the same samba school, etc.

private venue or in the street, has become commonplace. In other words, I have experienced the progressive appropriation of my research site, an area considered dangerous and abandoned, by a social group of which I myself am a member.

This process of objectification (Bourdieu, 2003) began during my doctoral studies. Although it was not the main focus of my thesis, several interviews conducted as part of my fieldwork had already revealed conflicts over the use of space during street Carnival. I experienced this paradox firsthand: on the one hand, I was studying why and how residents of the port district were opposed to the Porto Maravilha operation, showing that their contestations stemmed primarily from the fact that the project was not intended for them. On the other hand, I was participating, albeit indirectly, in the very “revitalization” that I was denouncing. Thus, after completing my thesis, my decision to focus specifically on festive and cultural dynamics in the port district compelled me to critically reflect on my own position within the city. I made this choice during the COVID-19 pandemic, a moment when existing inequalities between people were particularly exacerbated.

In 2022, Carnival was postponed until April. However, during the period when the festivities would normally have taken place, some blocos took to the streets, particularly in the port district. This prompted me to conduct seven in-depth interviews with members of different blocos from the South Zone and the port district. All participants had been involved in street Carnival for more than ten years. Together with quantitative data on the evolution of the movement prior to the pandemic, presented in the doctoral thesis by Alexandro Souza de Amico (2021), these interviews provided the basis for formulating the hypotheses at the core of this article.

Between 2023 and 2025, I conducted observational fieldwork on the occupation of space in the port district during Carnival, focusing on aspects such as the promotion of blocos, parade routes and schedules, audiences, waste management, and other related dynamics. I documented the blocos that were officially scheduled while also seeking to identify those operating without formal authorization. Through ten semi-structured interviews with musicians and cultural producers, I reconstructed the history of eight blocos and traced the changes in the locations of their parades, bearing in mind that most of them participate in several blocos. I also conducted more spontaneous interviews with revelers in the streets. I sought to understand how bloco members choose the locations where they parade, whether they are familiar with the history and population of the port district, and whether they visit the area outside Carnival. I also spoke with local residents and business owners about their perceptions of the evolution of street Carnival in their neighborhood.

In addition to this fieldwork, the methodology draws on the analysis of a range of documentary and academic sources, as well as recent publications, including newspaper articles and Instagram profiles of friends, blocos, and accounts dedicated to information on Carnival—such as @aboutcarnaval—, the port district—such as @zonaportuariarjalerta—, and independent media networks—such as @midianinja. All interviews and observations were carefully transcribed and documented in a field diary.

In short, being a musician, living in the South Zone, and participating in street Carnival provided a significant advantage, allowing me to observe my research object “from the inside” and to gain relatively easy access to contacts and information. At the same time, I am aware that this “belonging to the milieu” also poses a challenge in terms of objectivity. Since my own position cannot be ignored, throughout this article I have sought to avoid attributing meanings that are not supported by the data, while making my positionality explicit.

This article forms part of my current research project on the festive phenomenon in the contemporary urban context, approached from a critical and intersectional perspective (Collins, 2022) that takes into account structural power relations in the city. More specifically, it seeks to contribute to the debate on the “revitalization” of Rio de Janeiro’s port district and the “whitening” the territory, whether in terms of its population, history, memory, culture, or Carnival (Albinati, 2017; Borges, 2026; Santos et al., 2017; Sézérat, 2026a).

2. Rio de Janeiro, a “festive city”

In Rio de Janeiro, despite the considerable differences between neighborhoods, the city as a whole is characterized by an intense festive landscape. There is a unique relationship between festivity and everyday life in the city, the normalization of which defines the *Carioca*⁴ way of life. In addition to a local program of activities (including *rodas*, bands, and *bailes*), several major celebrations mark the local calendar, including New Year’s Eve, the Feast of Saint George, the June festivities, and, of course, Carnival (Gonzalez, 2024).

Carnival lasts five days, and its dates, falling between February and March, vary from one year to the next.⁵ However, in Rio de Janeiro, for years, street Carnival has extended over several months, thus distancing itself from traditional

4. *Carioca* is the demonym traditionally used for inhabitants of the city of Rio de Janeiro and, by extension, for characteristics associated with the city and its culture.

5. Carnival begins on the Friday preceding Ash Wednesday and ends on Ash Wednesday itself. Its dates are determined by Shrove Tuesday, which always falls 41 days before Easter. Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox (March 21).

festivities associated with a defined space-time. From December to April, blocos parade through the streets, particularly in the central and South Zone areas. This intensive “carnivalization” differs considerably from the traditional celebration, which was “localized” in time and space. Carnival is now embedded in a festive dynamic with diffuse boundaries. The city is no longer merely the setting for a major one-off festive event: the city itself is festive (Di Méo, 2001).

For Gravari-Barbas (2009, 2011), the “festive city” is a contemporary phenomenon linked to the shift in urban policies toward urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). The neoliberal turn that began in the late 1970s has had a major influence on how cities are financed, both in terms of investment (construction, rehabilitation) and day-to-day functioning (services, uses). The spread of neoliberalism across urban policies has created new spaces for the regulation of global capitalism and has contributed to making urban production increasingly dependent on the principles of competition and the market (Arantes; Vainer; Maricato, 2000; Brenner; Marcuse; Mayer, 2009). In this context, each city seeks to become as attractive as possible, attempting to reproduce the model of the “international city” (Berry-Chikhaoui; Deboulet; Roulleau-Berger, 2007), while at the same time promoting its own distinctive qualities. The organization of events and construction of cultural and sports infrastructure, the valorization of heritage, and the international promotion of a local identity are strategies for offering unique and authentic experiences, creating a positive image of the territory, and thereby increasing its symbolic capital (Zukin, 1995). Consequently, being a “festive city” capable of hosting major events makes it possible to create—and project, even internationally—an extremely positive, dynamic, and attractive urban identity.

The aim, therefore, is to examine how the promotion of Rio de Janeiro’s festive character is linked to a political desire that is reflected in the ways the city is conceived and experienced. Moreover, Gravari-Barbas (2009) emphasizes that the spatial inscription of festivity cannot be understood uniformly. Urban spaces are not equal (Whitaker, 2022), and, consequently, they cannot all be occupied or transformed by festivity in the same way. An analysis of this instrumentalization of festivity through urban policies requires therefore attention both to the actors involved in this phenomenon—who benefits from festivity?—and to the spaces in which it takes place—where does festivity occur?. The festive occupation of places can generate conflicts, depending on their histories, memories, functions, and the social or community groups that inhabit them. Hence, it is necessary to understand the “festive city” within the specific context of Rio de Janeiro and, more specifically, to examine how street Carnival has become one of the forces driving the requalification of (certain) urban spaces.

The next section examines the spatial evolution of street Carnival alongside the transformation of Rio de Janeiro's central neighborhoods. It focuses on the recent expansion of street Carnival and, particularly in the South Zone and the central area of the city, on the process through which it has become an "official" mega-event controlled by the Rio de Janeiro City Government.

3. Rio street Carnival: a long-standing dispute over the occupation of Rio's central neighborhoods

Street Carnival in Rio de Janeiro is a long-established tradition. Its origins date back to the sixteenth century, with *entrudo*, a tradition introduced from Portugal by the colonizers. Carnival in Rio developed primarily from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, with the emergence of *Grandes Sociedades*, *corsos*, masquerade sea bathing, *cucumbis*, *cordões*, *ranchos*, and, in the early twentieth century, *blocos*. What we recognize today as "Rio street Carnival" is therefore the product of the evolution of various Carnival festivities, over the past 150 years (Soihet, 1998).

Initially, during Carnival in central Rio, working-class populations took to the streets, while the bourgeoisie favored masquerade balls. However, in the context of the tropical *Belle Époque* and urban modernization, the street became a more orderly, courteous, and "civilized" space of sociability, where it was "good to *flâner*" (Ferreira, 2004). The bourgeoisie subsequently began to appropriate the streets, fostering encounters between different social groups and transforming public spaces in the city center into sites of competition between different forms of festivity.

To escape bourgeois repression, popular Carnival groups continually sought out new spaces in the city:

The street ceased to be seen merely as a place for enslaved Black people, the poor, children, and prostitutes—who began to lose the space they had occupied in colonial Rio—and gradually became a space for bourgeois leisure. Little by little, Carnival came to be regarded as a street festival, centered on the occupation of public spaces. A new Carnival for a new city. No longer the "coarse" *Entrudo*, but an urbane, Frenchified form of *flânerie*. [...] Yet however much bourgeois ideology sought to eliminate or "demonize" popular Carnival, the latter would develop strategies for survival, occupying the spaces left vacant by bourgeois Carnival.⁶ (Ferreira, 2013, p. 26-27)

6. This and all other non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the author.

The desire to Europeanize street Carnival was further reinforced from the second half of the nineteenth century onward with the emergence of the *Grandes Sociedades*. In the streets, these elite groups distinguished themselves from the broader population by parading on allegorical floats. While festive and Carnival societies existed in Europe to preserve popular Carnival and its traditions, in Rio de Janeiro the emergence of the *Grandes Sociedades* reflected an aspiration to make Carnival more elitist. Thus, balls and the *Grandes Sociedades* were regarded by the elite as “great Carnival”, while popular forms of celebration—including Zé Pereira, *cucumbis*, *cordões*, *ranchos*, and *blocos*—were considered “small Carnival” (Queiroz, 1999). Felipe Ferreira (2004) describes how this social distinction between Carnival festivities was expressed spatially in central Rio.

The streets of central Rio de Janeiro played an important role in the organization of Carnival as a national celebration. They were not only the preferred setting for elite Carnival societies, but also became spaces that enabled and encouraged the emergence of popular Carnival groups. (Ferreira, 2004, p. 157)

Thus, from the outset, the occupation of the streets by Carnival events in central Rio de Janeiro has reflected power relations between social groups, or, more broadly, processes of social distinction between bourgeois and popular forms of sociability. Public spaces are open to everyone, but their occupation gives rise to forms of spatial coexistence that are always shaped by the limits of the established social order (Korosec-Serfaty, 1988). Within these spaces, sociability between social groups is essentially a form of coexistence, governed by the mastery of norms and codes of conduct that can serve as tools of either inclusion or exclusion (Souza, 2022). Consequently, as a form of public sociability, street Carnival reproduces these relations between social groups and can become a “public sphere” (in the Habermasian sense) in which power is expressed, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Thus, in Rio de Janeiro, the “survival strategies” of popular street Carnival took the form of occupying new spaces in the city, reflecting a refusal to submit to or internalize domination rather than an inversion of social positions. It may therefore be stated that, since its emergence in Rio, popular street Carnival has contributed to the creation of competing forms of power in urban space, comparable to what Scott (2009, p. 25) defines as “*infrapolitics*” situated within “an unobtrusive realm of political struggle”.⁷

7. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of SCOTT J. C., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Hidden Transcripts. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1990 p.183.

Throughout the twentieth century, street Carnival in Rio de Janeiro became so firmly established that it came to be regarded as the city's emblematic festivity, as well as a highly significant festive ritual for Cariocas (Cavalcanti, 2015; DaMatta, 1979; Turner, 1990). Nevertheless, it cannot be understood without taking into account the different groups that compete for the occupation of the streets during the festivities. Although Carnival is often regarded as a democratic festivity, whereby “[W]ithin this frame the inversion of Brazilian Carnival is a principle that temporarily suspends the precise hierarchical classification of things, persons, actions, categories, and groups in the social arena...” (DaMatta, 1979, p. 132),⁸ street Carnival continues to reflect social structures in spatial terms. In other words, different Carnival manifestations may be more or less rebellious, politicized, symbolic, casual, or provocative depending, among other factors, on where they take place.

4. The officialization of street Carnival as an urban strategy

Street Carnival in Rio de Janeiro was subject to repression and censorship during the dictatorship, from 1964 until the mid-1980s. Its resurgence,⁹ particularly in the central and South Zone areas of the city, began in the 1990s, in the wake of various processes of political reopening (Sapia; Estevão, 2012). According to Amico (2021, p. 125), the revival of festivities in this privileged area of the city brought “new actors, new dynamics, greater politicization of the blocos, and considerable complexity in analyzing their relationship with urban space”. From the 2000s onwards street Carnival underwent a veritable explosion. The decade marked the beginning of a new era, characterized by the emergence of new blocos, with their own repertoires, aesthetics, and formations, as well as the creation of workshops that contributed decisively to the training of musicians. The significant increase in the number of blocos led to “a temporal expansion (Carnival became practically a summer-long celebration) and a spatial expansion of the festivity (for many who do

8. N.B. For direct citations, the English version was used of DAMATTA R. *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes* An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma. Notre Dame, Indiana - University of Notre Dame. 1992, p. 130. Translated by John Drury.

9. In fact, popular street Carnival, particularly Black Carnival, never ceased to exist in central and suburban Rio, but it progressively underwent a process of historical erasure (cf. PIMENTEL, J. *Blocos: uma história informal do Carnaval de rua* (*Blocos: an informal history of street Carnival*). Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2002). Borges (2026) shows how the idea of the “decline” of street Carnival emerged from the discomfort of the elites with the massive presence of popular groups in the city's streets and the difficulty of controlling them. The construction of the Sambadrome in 1984 played a central role in the rationalization of this popular Carnival culture (cf. VIANNA, H. *O mistério do samba* (*The Mystery of Samba*). Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores, 1995).

not enjoy Carnival—especially street Carnival—the feeling is that the city is almost ‘besieged’ by revelers)” (Herschmann; Fernandes, 2014, p. 77).

As street Carnival expanded, particularly in the South Zone and central areas of the city, it quickly became a major tourist attraction with significant potential for economic development.¹⁰ Beginning in 2009, the Rio de Janeiro City Government decided to institutionalize the festivities and, in preparation for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, to adapt them to the international standards governing mega-events (Machado, 2017).

Through a series of decrees, public authorities began requiring blocos to obtain authorization to parade and to comply with a set of rules concerning, for example, safety, the times at which parades may start and end, and predetermined routes, thereby assuming responsibility for regulating and controlling the festivity. At the same time, the Rio de Janeiro City Government established partnerships with the private sector to organize and manage the event. The companies responsible for its production hold the advertising rights, as well as a monopoly over the sale and marketing of their products on the streets. Thus, the creation of so-called “official” street Carnival has promoted the regulation, privatization, and commercialization of the festivity, highlighting the relationship between the festivalization and the (re)valorization of urban spaces.

Based on an analysis of three Strategic Plans for the city of Rio de Janeiro (2009-2012, 2013-2016, and 2017-2020), Amico (2021) describes how street Carnival, festivities, culture, and so-called “creative” activities¹¹ came to be regarded by public authorities as tools for urban marketing and branding. More specifically, in the context of the Porto Maravilha operation, he demonstrates that these activities are essential to promoting the gentrification of the area.

Since 2009, one of the main objectives of the Rio de Janeiro City Government has been to transform the city’s port district into a cultural and festive destination (Mendes; Wanis; Cretton, 2019; Sézérat, 2020) (Figure 1). In addition to constructing museums, the municipal government developed an urban cultural policy and

10. According to RioTur, the contribution of Rio’s Carnival to the economy has grown year after year (with the exception of 2021, due to the pandemic). In 2025, the event generated approximately BRL 5.7 billion in economic activity, and the number of people in the state of Rio de Janeiro was estimated at more than eight million, including 300,000 foreign tourists.

11. In his book *A ascensão da classe criativa (The Rise of the Creative Class)*, Florida proposes a theory of the development of postindustrial economies based on the presence in cities of a specific category of individuals whom he calls the “creative class.” According to Florida (2002), members of the creative class are distinguished from other members of the working population by the creative nature of their occupations, that is, their propensity for innovation. Such occupations are found particularly in the tertiary sector or knowledge economy, including, for example, new technologies, entertainment, journalism, events, culture, and the arts (FLORIDA, R. *A ascensão da classe criativa*. Porto Alegre: L&PM Editores, 2002).

established partnerships with “creative entrepreneurs” to develop the Porto Creative District. At its launch in 2015, the project brought together approximately fifty businesses and organizations, including Coletivo do Porto, Goma, Galpão Aplauso, Galpão Gamboa, Ação da Cidadania, the Orestes 28 cultural association, and Armazém da Utopia. Like other projects involving the rehabilitation of industrial sites in major global cities (such as Wynwood Walls in Miami; the Meatpacking District in New York; 22@ in Barcelona; and LX Factory in Lisbon), this cultural hub combines urban art, galleries, craft fairs, bars, and venues dedicated to events and festivities, with the aim of creating a new cultural center in the city and attracting a young, dynamic, and “creative” population (Pattaroni, 2020; Vivant, 2009).

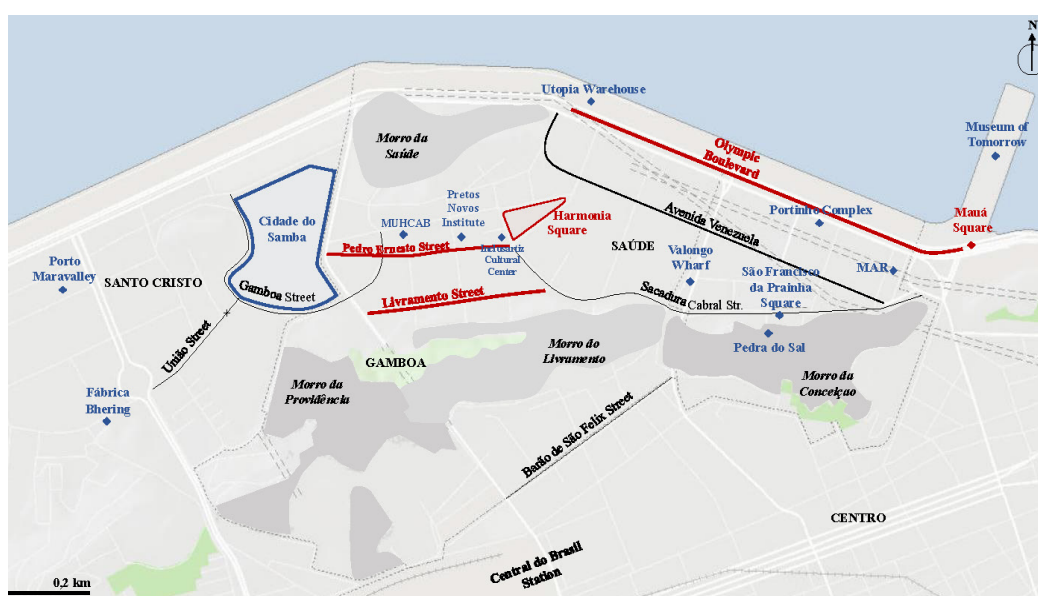


Figure 1. The port district of Rio de Janeiro as a cultural and festive space

Source: Own elaboration.

Several former industrial spaces (such as factories and warehouses) and townhouses have been renovated and subsequently occupied by cultural, festive, or “creative” activities.¹² Examples include the former port warehouses, the Portinho Complex, Fábrica Bhering, BCo. Spacemakers, the gallery of the Inclusartiz Institute, and, more recently, the Porto Maravilha (Pomar) innovation center, which houses Berro Galeria de Arte.

12. Continuing this project, in 2021 the Rio de Janeiro City Government launched the Reviver Centro Cultural program, with the aim of “revitalizing” the city center (that is, the area south of the Porto Maravilha operation) through culture and the arts, encouraging the transformation of small townhouses into cultural or festive spaces, such as art galleries, bookstores, studios, and bars. The project’s call for proposals is available at <https://www.cpar.rio/reviver-cultural/> (Accessed on: August 23, 2026).

Because of the activities they offer, the prices of the products they sell, and the public they attract, these places operate independently of their surroundings. The socioeconomic profiles of the people who frequent them differ significantly from those of residents in the port district. Moreover, the “placeless” nature of these different spaces has been particularly reinforced since 2014 by the widespread adoption of smartphones and the development of mobility apps in Rio de Janeiro (such as Uber, 99, and Táxi Rio). Visiting a place (even regularly) no longer necessarily entails knowing or engaging with the surrounding environment in order to reach it.

Among the strategies for urban development through culture, festivities, or “creativity” is the creation of squares or large pedestrian areas conducive to festive uses (Zherdev, 2015), such as Mauá Square and the Olympic Boulevard. Within a few years, these sites, along with several surrounding areas (such as Harmonia Square, Pedra do Sal, and São Francisco da Prainha Square), have become key gathering places for nightlife in Rio de Janeiro and came to be associated with new imaginaries and narratives.

Open and accessible to all, these urban spaces are now frequented by people from highly diverse backgrounds. According to Amico (2021), however, street Carnival was one of the main factors contributing to the attraction of privileged social groups, primarily middle-class, predominantly white residents of the city’s South Zone. In other words, unlike the other enclosed cultural spaces in the port district, street Carnival—precisely because it takes place in public space—helped break down a spatial barrier. Nevertheless, despite the festive context, social barriers between different groups persist during Carnival.

5. Street Carnival: a democratic festivity?

The expansion of street Carnival in the South Zone during the early 2000s was accompanied by the emergence of a brass-band musical movement that gave rise to numerous blocos. In response to the urban transformations underway in the city in preparation for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, part of this musical movement became politicized. Calling itself “neofanfarista,” this movement, composed of professional and amateur musicians, was described by Snyder (2022) as a networked musical social movement comparable to other national and international left-wing, anti-neoliberal movements.

This movement gains strength during Carnival, politicizing street Carnival and, throughout the rest of the year, carnivalizing politics. It can be understood as an autonomous musical practice in public space, capable of establishing its own rules independently and extending them across time and space. In other words,

neofanfarrismo creates autonomous territories by challenging the city's established order and, more broadly, all the mechanisms that condition access to space and the possibility of appropriating it—or, in Lefebvre's terms, creates spaces in which the right to the city can be exercised (Lefebvre, 2009).

Based on immersive fieldwork, Snyder (2022) emphasized two points. First, he argues that neofanfarrismo is not a movement characterized by a strong sense of collective belonging, nor one whose participants necessarily share the same ideological commitments or political objectives. Second, most participants identify as part of Rio de Janeiro's "alternative middle class": they are predominantly white, live in the city's more privileged neighborhoods, and seek to distance themselves from or challenge their own hegemonic position. Although most are socially privileged individuals, they perceive themselves as "alternative" in relation to peers who vote for right-wing candidates, are politically "alienated," or simply show little interest in working toward a more just, egalitarian, or democratic society. Nevertheless, I argue that this sense of being "alternative" is spatially circumscribed, insofar as the capacity of the neofanfarrista movement to create autonomous territories is itself closely tied to the hegemonic position its participants occupy in Brazilian society. Drawing on studies that emphasize the need to examine the intersectional dynamics at work in Rio de Janeiro's street Carnival (Borges, 2022; Frydberg; Ferreira; Dias, 2020), I argue that it is important to consider the mechanisms through which the exclusion or devalorization of certain territories is produced and reproduced. Indeed, struggles over the right to the city involve the exercise of a form of citizenship that can be conditioned by territory. From this perspective, the space of political contestation within street Carnival is constructed not only through the capacity of individuals to occupy a territory, but also through the recognition of social groups from across all the city's territories (Fraser, 2011).

Since 2009, the blocos associated with the neofanfarrista movement have opposed (explicitly or otherwise) the regulations imposed by the Rio de Janeiro City Government and its efforts to formalize street Carnival. They wish to continue occupying the streets freely and, to this end, seek spaces where they can continue to "do whatever they want". As I have shown, following the inauguration of the Olympic Boulevard in 2016, the port district became one of the destinations for these blocos, which seek to escape the "controlled spaces" of street Carnival (Sézérat, 2019) (Figure 2). There are several reasons for this. First, the area's central location makes it easily accessible from the South Zone on foot, by car, or by public transportation. Second, the Porto Maravilha operation created large pedestrian areas, while delays in real estate development left extensive vacant urban spaces. Moreover, the blocos understand that they can occupy the port district without

official authorization. Despite their desire to be “alternative”, they draw on their “white privilege” to occupy, without authorization, a space undergoing a process of territorial gentrification. In other words, an implicit authorization allows these blocos to “do whatever they want” in the port district during Carnival, since their presence contributes to transforming the image and uses of the territory in ways that align with the objectives of the Rio de Janeiro City Government.



Figure 2. Bloco 442 arriving on Olympic Boulevard during Carnival 2023

Source: Author's photograph.

Thus, paradoxically, the factors that draw the blocos associated with the neofanfarrista movement to the port district are the very ones they claim to oppose. In seeking to resist the regulation and commercialization of their Carnival practices, they nevertheless contribute to the gentrification of the area.

However, the differences between blocos associated with the neofanfarrista movement and other blocos that parade in the streets, whether officially authorized or not, are not always clear.

Far from disappearing, this dynamic of territorial “invasion” has intensified over time. Drawing on quantitative fieldwork conducted during the 2020 Carnival,¹³ Amico (2021) demonstrated that street Carnival has played a significant role in encouraging increasing numbers of revelers—whether residents of the South Zone or tourists—to frequent and occupy the port district, often for the first time. Between 2016 and 2020, the area consolidated its position as a major Carnival destination. At the same time, however, the distinction between blocos associated with the neofanfarrista movement and other blocos parading in the streets, whether officially authorized or not, has become increasingly blurred.

On the one hand, the first generation of musicians involved in the emergence of neofanfarrismo has aged, giving way to new, much larger generations. These newer generations have not experienced street Carnival as a form of resistance to dominant power and may not even have known it before its “officialization”. For them, participating in street Carnival is therefore not generally associated with political activism. Moreover, playing in a bloco has become a source of employment for many musicians, as the aesthetics—both sonic and visual—and atmosphere of street Carnival have now become commercial products marketed throughout the year. On the other hand, the neofanfarrista movement appears to have been overtaken by contemporary dynamics of communication and image- and video-sharing, in which the imperative to project happiness and beauty has become central. Brands selling products such as clothing, jewelry, musical instruments, and beer capitalize on moments of collective Carnival euphoria by sponsoring musicians and groups, whose media exposure contributes to the construction of a consumerist universe around street Carnival.

Consequently, the imaginaries traditionally mobilized during street Carnival (through collective actions, musical repertoires, and costumes) are increasingly less oriented toward experimenting with festive forms capable of generating political disruption or challenging the established order. The commercialization of street Carnival reflects how its “officialization” has functioned as a process of absorbing, and even eroding, its critical potential (Pattaroni, 2020, p. 15). Moreover, when blocos, whether officially authorized or not, whose participants are predominantly white, middle-class residents of the South Zone—referred to as “outside blocos”—occupy the port district, their presence is generally not part of a broader dynamic of protest but rather reflects a form of opportunism. They do not question the

13. The questionnaire collected information on respondents’ income, place of residence, means of transportation used to reach the port district, skin color, educational attainment, occupation, reasons for choosing a bloco in the area, how long they had frequented the district, and their motivations for visiting the port district during Carnival.

power relations reproduced through their presence, instead creating the illusion that festivities can erase or mitigate conflicts in the city (Waterman, 1998).

This dynamic of opportunistic occupation is reinforced by the unequal accessibility of the port district for different segments of the city's population. In 2025, the Free Fare Movement issued the manifesto "Carnival Without Turnstiles" (Movimento Tarifa Zero, 2025), denouncing inequalities in access to street Carnival and calling for free public transportation throughout the Carnival period (Figure 3). The manifesto highlights three main issues: the high cost of fares for buses, the subway, streetcars, and suburban trains; the lack of integration between different routes; and the concentration of street Carnival events in the South Zone and central areas of the city. For residents of working-class and low-income neighborhoods in the West and North Zones, who constitute the majority of Rio de Janeiro's population, reaching street Carnival by public transportation is therefore costly and may require complex travel arrangements, (especially journey times, and schedules).



Figure 3. Posts on the Free Fare Movement's Instagram account, February 28, 2025.

Key: 1) This talk of "occupying public space" during carnival - is it really for everyone? Or only for those who already have access to the city all year round?; 2) The world's biggest festivity is coming. But can everyone really take part? Most of the best-known blocos parade in the Central and South Zone areas of Rio de Janeiro. For many residents, getting to Carnival means relying on public transportation.; 3) What does it cost to get to Carnival? For someone living in Rio's West Zone, for example: Bus to Train = R\$4.70 — Train = R\$7.60 — VLT = R\$4.70 — Total = R\$34.00 (round trip). This means spending at least 10% of the minimum wage on transportation alone over the five days of Carnival. Carnival without Turnstiles.

Source: Free Fare Movement (Movimento Tarifa Zero).

For a truly democratic street Carnival accessible to all city residents, the Free Fare Movement calls for free public transportation during the festivities as a fundamental means of combating mechanisms of peripheralization. Spatial

and social inequalities in access to the festivities—even when they take place in the street—help explain how street Carnival in the South Zone contributes to the gentrification of the port district. The blocos that “invade” the area during Carnival are, for the most part, “privileged blocos,” in the sense that their members “already have access to the city all year round” and that their presence in the area demonstrates how street festivities can reproduce forms of exclusion and even dispossession.

6. The spatial inscription of street Carnival in the port district: between dispossession and contestation

The neighborhoods surrounding Rio de Janeiro’s former port, like the vast majority of port districts around the world, have been shaped over the centuries by intense commercial and, later, industrial activity. What distinguishes this port, however, and makes it unique is that it constitutes the most important material vestige of the African diaspora in the Americas. Between 1811 and 1831, nearly one million enslaved Africans disembarked in Rio’s port district. The Valongo Wharf, where ships docked at the time,¹⁴ received the largest number of enslaved Africans. Today, located at the heart of the port district, the Valongo Wharf archaeological site was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017 and has since gained international recognition as a result of this prestigious designation.

In this context, heritagization, like culture and festivities, has become a tool for urban development. In addition to the designation of the Valongo Wharf as a heritage site and the development of the site itself, the imaginary of the port district as an “Afro-descendant territory” has become established (Vassallo; Cicalo, 2015). According to Souty (2020), the transmission of this “local landscape of memory” involves not only the creation of a historical and archaeological circuit celebrating African heritage, but also the occupation of the territory through artistic, festive, ritual, and folkloric practices associated with Afro-Brazilian culture.

Consequently, I understand all collective occupations and appropriations of spaces in the port district as being part of this landscape of memory, which requires us to consider the social and racial origins of those who occupy and appropriate these spaces. From this perspective, the promotion of street Carnival in this area must be viewed not only as part of a strategy of territorial gentrification, but also in relation to the enduring dynamics of coloniality that shape the production and occupation of urban space in our post-slavery and postcolonial era.

14. The Valongo Wharf was filled in twice (in 1848 and 1911) and rediscovered during construction work associated with the Porto Maravilha project.

During Carnival 2025, the Instagram account *Zona Portuária Alerta* (Port District Watch), a community news account covering Rio de Janeiro's port district, posted a photograph of revelers cooling off in the reflecting pools surrounding the Museum of Tomorrow (Figure 4). In the accompanying caption, the author questioned how public authorities would have reacted if the people jumping into the pools and enjoying themselves had been Black children from the neighborhoods and favelas in the area. The post thus called attention to the relationship between the social and racial profile of those depicted—particularly their skin color and social class—and the police's tolerance of their unauthorized use of the pools.

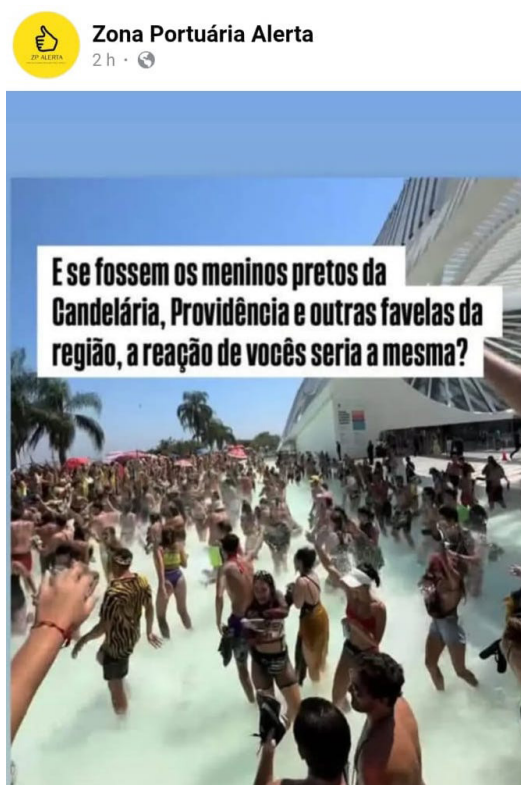


Figure 4. Revelers in the reflecting pools outside the Museum of tomorrow, March 16, 2025.

Key: If these were Black boys from Candelária, or Providência, or other favelas in the area? Would your reaction be the same?

Source: Zona Portuária Alerta.

The comment accompanying the photograph exposes the scene's symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1987), recalling the phenomenon of *rolezinhos*—large gatherings of predominantly Black and working-class young people from the urban periphery in shopping malls, particularly visible in Brazilian cities between December 2013 and January 2014. The repression and attempts to restrict these

gatherings revealed the contradictions underlying the myth of “racial democracy” in Brazil. Similarly, the occupation of the Museum of Tomorrow’s reflecting pools by young people from the surrounding port district would likely have been met with repression. This contrast is particularly revealing in the context of a festivity whose organization is increasingly regulated by public authorities. As DaMatta (1986) argues, street Carnival does not escape the reproduction of social and racial hierarchies in urban space or the forms of discrimination associated with them. In other words, “legal Carnival” perpetuates a “hierarchical citizenship”:

Divided into first-class citizens (those who are subject to no laws, either because they make them or because they are responsible for enforcing them), second-class citizens (those who remain in the social and political shadow of the former), and, finally, if we may simplify, ordinary citizens, the “people”, the “masses”: those who are required to obey all the laws. [...] What I want to draw attention to is the issue of laws and the “legal universe” as a form of social discrimination. [...] The problem lies not so much in the absence or presence of laws, but rather—and this is the point—in the groups and individuals who command, control, devise, and decide how they are to be enforced. (DaMatta, 1986, p. 75-76)

Although Carnival is understood by DaMatta (1986, p. 85) as a time when one’s true social position is disguised, the regulation of street Carnival by public authorities in Rio’s port district can be understood as reproducing inequalities in access to and occupation of urban space, privileging dominant social groups and thereby reinforcing a segregative and discriminatory form of urban organization (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 163). In other words, even during Carnival, the possibility of celebrating is not equally available to everyone, everywhere, or in the same way.

Against the backdrop of these conflicts over the appropriation of the territory and its symbolic markers, different Afro-Brazilian blocos have chosen to parade specifically in the port district (Figure 5). Their Carnival activities are political in nature, seeking to reclaim the territory and challenge the whitening of street Carnival in the area (Sézérat, 2026b). These blocos thus seek to defend not only a festive practice, but also a space for the affirmation of Afro-descendant culture (Gonzalez, 2024), while confronting the racist logics associated with the Porto Maravilha operation. More specifically, Sánchez et al. (2025, p. 476) argue that the whitening of the territory occurs through processes of material heritage-making—architectural and urban—as well as intangible heritage-making, involving cultural practices linked to historical memory. These processes, they contend, ultimately value “the Black presence of the past at the expense of the Black presence of the present.”



Figure 5. The Afoxé Filhos de Gandhi bloc during Carnival 2025

Source: Author's photograph.

As the Rio de Janeiro City Government moves toward the creation of the Pequena África open-air museum,¹⁵ it would not be surprising if Afro-Brazilian blocos were also mobilized as markers of identity. “Traditional” Afro-Brazilian street Carnival would become an “authentic” tourist attraction, producing a form of cultural dispossession. Similar processes have already occurred in the port districts of New Orleans, particularly in Tremé (Hosbey, 2018) and in London’s Notting Hill neighborhood (Ferdinand; Williams, 2018). The “domestication” of the jazz and Carnival scenes has contributed not only to the gentrification of these neighborhoods and the depoliticization of the cultural and festive practices of Afro-descendant communities, but also to the displacement of the populations whose presence and practices directly sustain the memory and cultural identity of these neighborhoods.

15. The BNDES Pequena África Competition was launched in early 2025 by the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES), with the support of the Valongo Patrimônio Vivo Consortium (Available at: <https://www.bndes.gov.br/wps/portal/site/home/onde-atuamos/cultura-e-economia-criativa/iniciativa-valongo/concurso-bndes-pequena-afrika>. Accessed on: August 23, 2026).

Conclusion

The Carnival dynamics analyzed in this article have provided a lens through which to understand how street Carnival can be instrumentalized to symbolically differentiate a territory and, more broadly, contribute to its gentrification. As a space of public sociability, street Carnival can simultaneously foster forms of inclusion and generate dynamics of exclusion, depending on the intentions and representations that shape the production and appropriation of the spaces in which it takes place.

In Rio de Janeiro's port district, the "uncontrolled," yet no less strategic, growth of street Carnival contributes to the transformation of the territory into a new festive centrality oriented toward privileged social groups. This dynamic serves the objectives of the Porto Maravilha urban operation by symbolically reconfiguring the territory and transforming the profile of its users. It can be understood as a form of "peripheral gentrification" (Novaes, 2017), generating disputes over access to and appropriation of space and bringing groups, bodies, identities, and imaginaries into conflict.

Thus, although Carnival is often considered as a moment of liberation and subversion and may function as a form of resistance or even be understood as a utopian process capable of proposing an alternative reality, street Carnival in Rio de Janeiro does not escape the logics of structural urban segregation that characterize Brazilian cities (Whitaker, 2022). Not all spaces in the city are accessible to everyone on equal terms, nor are all social groups able to appropriate and use them in the same way.

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- a) Search, systematization, and final organization of references: No.
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Open Data

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