

“WAS IT YOU, LORD?”: THE FACES OF COUNTERMESSIANISM IN BODIES, ALLEGORIES, AND ICONS AT THE CARNIVAL OF MANGUEIRA SAMBA SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to propose reflections on images elaborated by the parade of the Grêmio Recreativo Escola de Samba Estação Primeira de Mangueira, which at the carnival of 2020 presented the storyline “The Truth Will Make You Free” (“A Verdade vos Fará Livre”), an update of Christ’s biography, as if he had born in Mangueira Hill, North Zone of Rio de Janeiro city. Based on images of the bodies, floats and icons presented in the parade, counter-messianic works produced in the field of visual arts that unfold in a dispute of narratives centred on the figure of Jesus Christ are brought to the discussion. From Andy Warhol’s Pop Art to other non-verbal discourses present in advertising and the arts in general, we seek to draw a panorama of how images about Christ are the targets of public controversies.

KEYWORDS
Non-verbal Speech;
Anthropology
and Image; Public
Controversies;
Counter-messianism;
Carnival.

Finally, the article, in the guise of Apotheosis, brings the allegory alluding to Calvary, with a young Black Christ studded with bullets, and how this image provokes reflections by presenting in the foreground a peripheral body, different from the hegemonic vision of the whitened Christ over the centuries.

1. INTRODUCTION

What if Jesus Christ were reborn on Mangureira Hill, in the 21st century? What if he had a “black face, Indigenous blood, female body”?¹ The updating of the image of Jesus Christ is at the centre of contemporary disputes and tensions that unfold in multiple manifestations, among them the samba schools’ parade. Conceived by Leandro Vieira, a carnival artist who has dialogued with works and speeches present in contemporary art in his parades, the “Jesus of the people”, as the samba from Mangureira sings, bursts onto the Avenida Marquês de Sapucaí, stage for the Rio de Janeiro samba schools’ parades, in the 2020 Carnival, as an image and discourse that, throughout its argument, will be presented as counter-messianic.

By proposing “the power of images and representations of models, since it is a human inclination to be attracted to people who look like you” (G.R.E.S. Estação Primeira de Mangureira 2020, 118),² Leandro Vieira questions the crystallization of the image of the historical Jesus, consolidated, especially in the Middle Ages, in the image and likeness of a man with fair skin and green eyes. The questioning about the biotype of Christ and the canonical figurations of the Messiah serves as a background for discussions involving the use of his teachings as an instrument of power and domination by religious institutions in the Brazil of the “God Above All” of 2020.

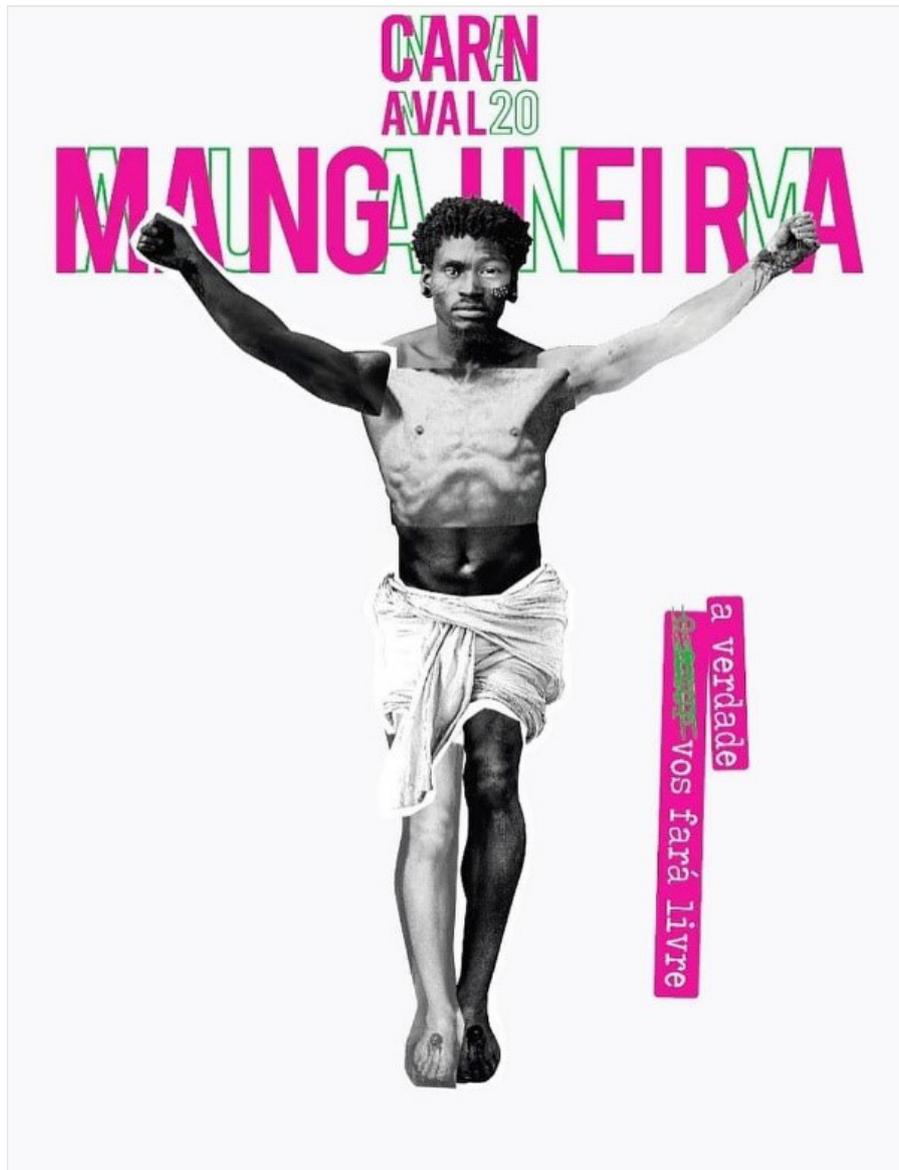
1. Excerpt from the samba plot of Estação Primeira de Mangureira in 2020, entitled “*A Verdade Vos Fará Livre*”, by Manu da Cuíca and Luiz Carlos Máximo. According to Augras (1998), in “O Brasil do Samba Enredo”, the “reinterpretation of official history by samba dancers” has taken place since the time when the national theme was mandatory, with emphasis on the celebration of historical figures considered “transgressors”, such as black women exalted by the plots of Acadêmicos do Salgueiro samba school from the 1960s onwards. However, the contesting character gains new impetus from the end of the 2010s, with emphasis on the plot of Mangureira of 2019 “*História para Ninar Gente Grande*”, by its iconoclastic character regarding the “figures” of official history, such as the pioneers celebrated in public spaces such as in monuments, whose trajectories are marked by their participation in colonial violence. The Mangureira plot discussed in the article is therefore part of the discursive movement described above, expanding the scope to figures from Western cosmology, such as Jesus.

2. A statement close to the principle of “becoming what one is” of romantic Bildung, a process that describes the construction of the self from reflexivity in the face of ideal images, the model image being precisely that of Jesus, according to the medieval theology book *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas Kempis, the main source of German thought on the matter. The substitution, and even interchangeability, between the image of Christ and images of the “true self” for the observer thus refer to the classical theme within the field of philosophical and artistic discussions.



The title of Mangueira's plot even proposes a paraphrase of the political ethics slogan adopted by the current president (and now taken up by Marcelo Crivella in the re-election campaign for Rio's mayor, in 2020): "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free", of the Gospel of John. By proposing the paraphrase, and not a new motto, Mangueira's parade seeks to interrupt the capture of certain sayings, showing that Christian discourse can also be made by other enunciators. The rephrasing of "The truth will set you free" to "The truth will make you free" has two meaning effects. First, it marks the difference in the discursive position by proposing not the repetition, but the appropriation of the biblical syntagm. Second, the emphasis of the sentence shifts from the subject to the object due to the transfer, in Portuguese, of the meaning of "freedom" from the verb to the modifier, opening space for the polysemy of the term "free" for the interpretants. But who verbally and non-verbally enunciates the truth in Mangueira's parade? The publicity image of the plot represents the speaker:

FIGURE 1
 Poster of Mangueira's 2020 plot, in which an image formed by several fragments of human types appears in the foreground, in line with the discourse of the appearance of a contemporary Christ among subjects in social vulnerability. Source: Advertisement.



The image is formed by collage, a technique of Pop Art par excellence, which composes the male body in a gesture of open arms with parts of indigenous and black origin. It is, therefore, an Afro-Amerindian body, resulting not from miscegenation, but from the simultaneous visual salience of two corporeities, similar to chimerical images (Severi 2013). The Afro-Amerindian body brings as indices of the passion and the body of Christ the stigmas, the underwear from the Roman period, and the cross, formed by the verbal components of the image, with the horizontal axis corresponding to the name of the school and the vertical axis composed by the word carnival and by the title of the plot. The carnival artist Leandro Vieira justifies the hypostases of Christ that Mangueira's carnival will present:

By envisioning a face for Jesus Christ, Estação Primeira de Mangueira looks at its people with the intention of showing that the experience of Christ's life is much more associated with the anguish of the oppressed than with the whitened, Eurocentric, sexist, and patriarchal image that was painted in a secular portrait.³

In 1995, the Fraternity Campaign in Brazil had as its theme “Was It You, Lord?”, whose message called attention to “the Christian’s duty to welcome the ‘excluded’ brother who identifies himself with the person of Jesus Christ”. The inspiration comes from the biblical passage where Jesus states that the one who serves the “least brethren” is personally doing something for him (Matthew 24:31-46). Thus, the text points out that Christ could be anyone among many in the contemporary world, launching the challenge of the ability to recognize him in the form of other bodies. And it is these many faces of Christ that appear in various artistic manifestations. After all, Christ could be a “shabby” kid in the region of Buraco Quente”, son of an “unemployed carpenter father” and mother “Maria das Dores Brasil”, who enters into dispute against a figure of Jesus who became, according to Mangueira’s plot,

a kind of guarantor of a conservative logic that reaffirms the oldest values of a country founded in the light of indigenous exploitation, the widespread racism with the practice of black slavery, the machismo based on patriarchy and the excessive social inequality that continues to “sacrifice” and “crucify” (LAA).

The document, the history of the plot of Estação Primeira de Mangueira, has excerpts written by the theologian Leonardo Boff, in defence of the school’s plot from when, in January 2020, a series of accusations of desecration of the name of Christ were fired in WhatsApp groups. According to Boff,

3. Excerpt extracted from the History of the plot “*A Verdade Vos Fará Livre*”, available at <https://l1esa.globo.com/downloads/carnaval/abre-alas-domingo.pdf>. Hereinafter referred to as LAA. According to Augras (1998), in “O Brasil do Samba Enredo”, the “reinterpretation of official history by samba dancers” has taken place since the time when the national theme was mandatory, with emphasis on the celebration of historical figures considered “transgressors”, such as black women exalted by the plots of Acadêmicos do Salgueiro samba school from the 1960s onwards. However, the contesting character gains new impetus from the end of the 2010s, with emphasis on the plot of Mangueira of 2019 “*História para Ninar Gente Grande*”, by iconoclastic character in relation to the “figures” of official history, such as the pioneers celebrated in public spaces as in monuments, whose trajectories are marked by their participation in colonial violence. The Mangueira plot discussed in the article is therefore part of the discursive movement described above, expanding the scope to figures from Western cosmology, such as Jesus.

There are indeed many Jesuses, that is, all those who had and are having the same fate as Jesus: those oppressed by landowners, those exploited by employers, women raped, children raped, LGBT people discriminated against. All of these actualize the passion of Jesus. There is more. Jesus as a man represents all of humanity, male and female. The Church teaches that Jesus took on all that is human. If he hadn't taken on the whole human, he wouldn't have been the saviour and deliverer of all (LAA).

Thus, the article will show the discursive functioning of the visual elements of Manguiera's carnival within the proposal to present alternative figurations of Christ, accompanied by aesthetic, philosophical, and religious arguments mobilized in the defence of the plot. The search for discursive resonances (Souza 2018) evidences the parade affiliation to the contemporary movement of both Christianity and the Visual Arts started in the 1960s, manifested by the vernacularisation of liturgical languages promoted by Vatican II and the appropriation of the classical artistic repertoire for the references of mass culture via Pop Art, including sacred motifs. In the second moment, the discursive resonances correspond to the demands of civil society against the interference of political-religious configurations in the State's dispositions regarding specific bodies such as women, LGBTQ+, blacks, and indigenous people, a movement that is being called "counter-messianism". Counter-messianisms are expressed above all in the form of performance in which the body becomes a floating signifier and non-canonical icon of the instantiation of Christ, producing the pictorial gesture that will be called transfiguration, an effect of the iconoclasm's own meaning caused by the tension between sacralization and desecration according to the reading of the audiences engaged by such images.

2. TODAY'S *KENOSIS*: FROM JESUS POP TO "JESUS DA GENTE" ("PEOPLE'S JESUS")

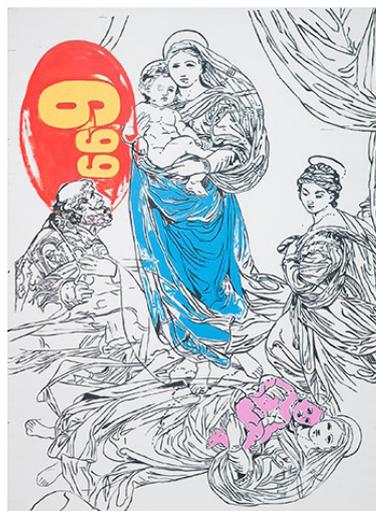
The bases for constructing alternative Christological narratives occur by inserting the central character of the plot in contemporary contexts, such as in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a rock opera written in 1970 by Andrew Lloyd Webber, with libretto and lyrics by Tim Rice. The show, which recounted the political and personal struggles of Christ, premiered on Broadway in 1971 and reached Hollywood screens in 1973. The works – theatrical play and film – were stitched together by songs and dramatizations of everyday situations, which formed a narrative from characters and scenes lived by Christ and adapted them to the urban setting of the early 1970s.

The beginning of the 1970s saw the implementation of the *aggiornamento* resulting from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which aimed to update the Catholic Church's relations with the world. From the conciliar resolutions, Latin was to be replaced by vernaculars as a liturgical and documental language, popular instruments such as the guitar would be admitted in the mass celebrated now with the priest facing the assembly, among other innovations that aimed, above all, to attract the young people to Catholic Christianity. In the missionary aspect, the Encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, launched by Paul VI in 1975, reinforces the need to adapt the evangelizing practice to modern life, stressing the prominence of images and means of communication in contemporary culture. At the same time, the phenomenon of singing priests appeared in Brazil, such as Jonas Abib and Zezinho.

The visual arts undergo a similar movement of attention to the contemporaneity manifestations in the form of mass media and the circulation of goods in the consumer society. Between the criticism and fascination gazes, Pop Art sought to bring the repertoire of classical art to the environment of the star system and of reproducibility without aura, both by the superposition of references from different times and spaces and the use of techniques associated with the mechanical production of images, such as screen printing and the cross-linked dots of graphic printing. Above all, Andy Warhol, raised in a Catholic family with Byzantine European roots, used to combine kitsch and the mundane in sublime works, using as inspiration the classic works *The Last Supper*, by Leonardo Da Vinci, and the *Madonna* by Raphael.

FIGURES 2 AND 3

The Last Supper, by Leonardo da Vinci, and Madonna, by Raphael, according to Andy Warhol: contemporary techniques for classical works update the discourse on biblical characters. Source: warhol.org/exhibition/andy-warhol-revelation.



In the 2000s, the American photographer David LaChapelle, who debuted in New York in the magazine *Interview*, edited by Warhol, launched a collection of photographs entitled *Jesus Is My Homeboy*. The series was inspired by a shirt collection launched in 2003, which featured the phrase alongside a printed image of a Christ drawn on a neutral background.

FIGURE 4

Jesus is My Homeboy T-shirt marketed in 2003, worn by celebrities and popularized in the United States.

Source: Reproduction.



LaChapelle wondered what it would be like “if God had chosen to incarnate in 21st Century America instead of 1st Century Palestine”. In the work, the “partners” of Jesus are the apostles, in addition to the recurring figure of Mary Magdalene. The subjects in the images are portrayed wearing hoodies, piercings, and tattoos. They are multi-ethnic young people, stereotyped by society. “They are the ones that, if you passed them on the street, you would probably try to avoid eye contact out of fear of them. And even in these photos, Jesus sees beyond stereotypes and welcomes everyone into his company”.⁴

⁴. *Idem*.

2.1. PEOPLE'S JESUS (*JESUS DA GENTE*)

The discursive memory of the religious and artistic movements of contemporization of Christ find correspondence with Mangueira's front commission in the 2020 parade, entitled "*Seu Nome É Jesus da Gente*" (His Name is People's Jesus). Choreographed by the couple Rodrigo Negri and Priscilla Mota, we observe conceptual and visual similarities between LaChapelle's work and the opening group of the green and pink samba school parade. According to the defence of the item "*Comissão de Frente*" (Opening Group), the explanatory text sent to the judges, "the general identification of the characters takes place by the reinterpretation of period costumes plus signs of contemporaneity". Here, we verify the option of keeping costumes and characterizations identifiable with the portrayed characters (Jesus Christ and the Apostles), with contemporary adaptations, with clothes sewn into jeans, in addition to using electronic devices and habits of our times, such as taking selfies with a cell phone. "Mangueira has a lot of the street too. In fact, my artistic production talks a lot with the street, with things on the street" (Vieira 2020, 23). Thus, he presents himself as a pop Christ from the backstreet, followed by his homeboys (partners), far from the image of a contrite, sorrowful, and dehumanized Jesus. The choreographies presented also adopt a discourse aimed at building a Christ closer to an updated and human figure.

With dance and gesture, his behaviour is cool, close to the musical culture and attitudes of poor Brazilian communities. Adept of contemporary practices, he and his "tram" are in a "ride" that conceptually and choreographically glimpses the tensions and possible situations of vulnerability that those who embraced "sinners" and repudiated the oppression would suffer if their public life were transposed for 2000 years ahead (LAA).

In action in the parade, the opening group brings together elements in which we identify visual and discursive similarities with the photographic series by David LaChapelle, *Jesus Is My Homeboy*, which transports scenes described in the Bible and represented in classic works of art to everyday situations. In both scenes, the apostles are dressed in elements of the urban cultures of large metropolises, with emphasis on clothing linked to the hip hop cultural complex. Both LaChapelle and the commission's choreography of the green and pink opening group highlight the classic Last Supper setting. The image chosen to illustrate the article highlights another type of sharing different from receiving spices, the communion made possible by the photographic style of the selfie, which demonstrates the historical drift that separates the works of LaChapelle and Vieira in terms of updating contemporary aesthetic forms. However, even if the visual elements are not exactly corresponding, the discursive functioning,

by the gesture of displacing figurations from classical religious scenes to contemporary contexts, characteristic of Pop Art – according to Bonfim (2021) and McCarthy (2002) – stands out in the composition of the works compared here.⁵

FIGURE 5

Reproduction of the classic work “The Last Supper”, by Leonardo da Vinci, reinterpreted by David LaChapelle. Apostles wear contemporary casual clothing in addition to accessories such as caps and tattoos. Source: Reproduction.



FIGURE 6

During the parade, the actor and dancer who played Jesus, Arthur Morsch, took selfies with the cast of the opening group. Photo: Arthur Morsch.



5. The music video for the song “Judas” by Lady Gaga, conceived and directed by the artist herself and the choreographer Laurieann Gibson, performs the same discursive gesture of displacing and combining references from classical art that approaches religious scenes for the contemporary context. In the case of the video, Jesus and disciples appear as a motorcycle gang, another reference of contemporary urban culture such as the aforementioned “homeboys” by LaChapelle and Vieira.

In addition to the opening group, other images of a Christ with many faces were presented throughout the Estação Primeira de Mangueira's parade. Divided into five acts, the plot brought in the penultimate allegory the representation of Calvary. This time, the update to the crucifixion of Christ was represented by a clear mention of the figure of Jesus who reveals himself "in a diverse number of bodies that refer to minority social groups intending to spread the peaceful, inclusive, and devoid of intolerance image of the one whose teachings are the foundations of Christianity" (LAA). Among the most photographed images of the parade, the allegory brought elements to provoke the public to reflect on Vieira.

3. THE COUNTER-MESSIANISMS

The Mangueira's plot is part of the current controversies about the relationship between the religious and the political within the Brazilian public power, which have been taking the form of what we are calling in the article "counter-messianisms".⁶ The counter-messianisms on paper have the following characteristics: 1) they promote counter-hegemonic views of Christological conceptions, mainly in terms of imagery, resuming the revisions about the figuration of Christ in contemporary arts; 2) they use elements of the "grammar of public religion" (Bonfim 2019) and, therefore, deal with verbal repertoires (biblical narratives, quotations from the gospels, theological formulas) and non-verbal repertoires (iconographies, performances of bodies) of wide repercussion in the Brazilian urban space, despite lacking the cosmological density of intradenominational Christianity, similar to the deep biblical culture of the *sertanejo* peasantry described by Otávio Velho (1995), both providing language for political disputes; 3) they are demands from social bases that can be considered secularizing (and not secularized), since they lead to less interference from organized religion in the conduct of public affairs without, however, abandoning sacred references in elaborating critical discourses; and 4) they are movements of messianic inspiration that are constructed in a way contrary not to Christian soteriology, but to certain messianic formations with which they dispute not only the question of the canonical figuration of Jesus, but also the attribution of new meanings in which this figure is

6. In addition to issues related to counter-messianism, the Marquês de Sapucaí avenue also saw plots about classic manifestations of messianism. We highlight the plot of the Paraíso do Tuiuti Samba School for the 2020 carnival, entitled "O Santo e o Rei: Encantarias de Sebastião", by the carnival artist João Vitor Araújo, which addressed the messianic aura around Dom Sebastião, the "Desired King", who was born in Portugal in 1554 and disappeared in the Battle of Alcácer Quibir, in Morocco, in 1578. Several legends about the disappearance and possible resurgence of Dom Sebastião were to inhabit the popular imagination in Portugal and Brazil, inspiring the creation of popular messianic movements, such as the of Canudos, led by Antônio Conselheiro. The critical event for the conformation of Brazilian society after the proclamation of the republic was portrayed by the parade "Os Sertões", by the samba school Em Cima da Hora, in 1976, a reference in terms of samba-plot.

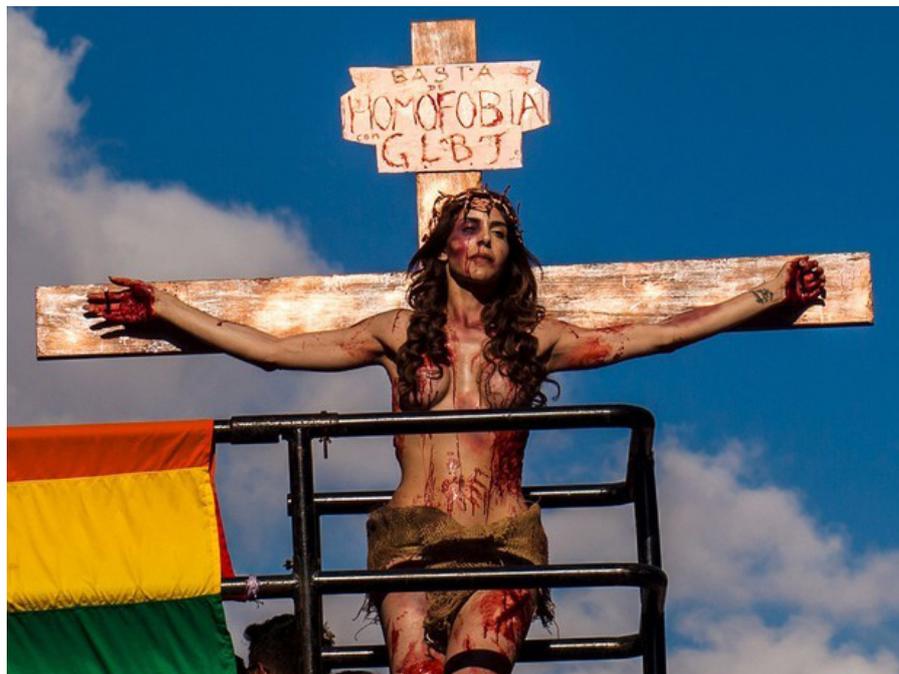
placed at stake. I play the political identification of Christ: whether with the oppressed/excluded or with the oppressors, to use current categories of Brazilian Christian political thought.

The samba school parades can be considered pioneers in the proposition of counter-messianisms *avant la lettre* of the previous definition for elaborating the non-canonical figuration of Jesus most representative of the Brazilian artistic imagination, the *Cristo Mendigo* (Homeless Christ) of Beija-Flor de Nilópolis samba school for the carnival of 1989. In a parade “marked by the luxury/junk duality by the inversion of positions”, the carnival artist Joãozinho Trinta sought to show that, behind the exuberance and ostentation, “the sweat of so many who work to support them could be implicit, in an eternal conflict between essence and appearance, between what is shown and what is hidden” (Sousa 2000, 41).

The homeless Christ belongs to the discursive memory of the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro, providing resumptive images for critical purposes such as the 2018 carnival that criticized the first year of management of the licensed bishop of the Universal Church, Mayor Marcelo Crivella (Bonfim 2019). However, the counter-messianisms to which the Mangueira’s parade is affiliated as a political movement, according to the analytical proposal of the article, have as their inaugural act the embodiment of Christ in “trans” people in public acts demanding respect for the rights of the LGBTQI+ population and greater secularity of the Brazilian State. Actions that took place as a result of pressure from the evangelical faction and other conservative elements of the National Congress on the policies of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers’ Party) governments, in the presidential terms of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, related to sex education (fought against under the term gender ideology), issues related to assisted reproduction, abortion, and same-sex civil unions.

Thus, a recent landmark of the counter-messianic movements in the form of controversies in the Brazilian public sphere is the performance of the transsexual actress Viviane Beleboni in the Pride Parade held in June 2015 in the city of São Paulo, which is presented like Jesus at the time of the crucifixion.

FIGURE 7
The counter-messianic figure embodied by actress Viviany Beleboni, during the 2015 Pride Parade, in São Paulo, Brazil. Source: Advertisement.



To better understand the public commotion surrounding the crucifixion scene depicted by the LGBT movement, note that the Christian image is not limited to two-dimensional or three-dimensional representations in inert materials such as paper, wood, plaster, and stone. In addition to the most diverse bodily elements (fluids, organs, shavings), living humans are holy images, the greatest model being Christ himself, whose attributes that shaped him as a person became visible through *kenosis*.⁷ Thus, the dramaturgical representations of Christ seem, in a way, to always update the very imagification of the divine Christ principle, which leads us to consider that stagings are also producers of animated holy images. The native category used by the promoters of the living image of the crucifixion is performance, a central notion for justifying the handling of the sacred image, thus trying to conjure the possibility of secular desecration.

It is inappropriate, in the present work, to recover the iconoclasm that occurred after the performance, including physical aggression against the actress, in which violence against LGBTQI+ bodies assume vivid iconoclastic intentions – for the repercussion of the performance within the

⁷ As Besançon (1997) shows, the notion of the Roman person concerned a certain set of traits that could be manifested in the most different types of materiality, being able to attribute the presence of the imperial person, for example, both in the corporeal form and in the form of portraits. It is precisely based on such a notion of person – alongside the interpretation that “by becoming flesh” the verb also becomes an image sign – that Byzantine Christianity will make the icon a third Eucharistic species alongside bread and wine (Bonfim 2012).

National Congress, see Luna (2017). However, as shown by Latour, situations of iconoclasm are characterized by the ambiguity of the gesture of destruction of images, which also contributes to promoting and even proliferating icons, giving rise to iconophilia. In this case, the reactions to Beloboni's performance end up consolidating the pictorial motif "*Jesus Travesti*", which has worked both as an expression of theological inclusivity (as in the play "The Gospel According to Jesus, a Rainha do Céu", censored in 2018 during the management of Marcelo Crivella at the head of the City of Rio de Janeiro), accusation (to the left-wing candidates during the 2018 presidential campaign, especially to the representative of Communist Party of Brazil, Manuela D'Ávila), satire (as in the sketch "Fake News" from the humorous channel Porta dos Fundos), and slogan (sung by singer Johnny Hooker during the show).

The figuration of Christ in trans bodies is made possible due to the polysemy of the body of Christ when the crucifix is taken as a floating icon, a relationship of meaning elaborated from Lévi-Strauss's (2003) notion of "floating signifier" (2003). According to the ethnologist in the famous "Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss", the human mind is constantly engaged in the task of making sense in the face of the lack of meaning inherent in the world. However, the units to which the senses adhere, or signifiers in Saussure's terms, are scarce in the face of the symbolic enterprise of signification. Thus, certain words are considered as "floating signifiers" due to eminently serving as carriers of variable, contextual, transitory meanings, instead of the stability of the signifier-signified structural relationship. These are the so-called *mana* words, referring to the Polynesian term *mana*, which refers to the pervasive principle present in the world that escapes the single definition, such as *axé* in Afro-Brazilian religions.

However, Lévi-Strauss himself points to the possibility of the body becoming a point of convergence of a multitude of senses, as in the case of the shaman who becomes a symptom of all the anxieties of the group, condensing the excess of meaning of collective symbolic processes with shamanistic corporeality. However, bodies are in the non-verbal realm, coming closer to the sign form of the icon than to the symbols, according to Peirce's terminology, the Saussurean linguistic sign being among the latter. The process of signification proper to icons, iconicity, concerns similarity or correspondence relations between the referent and the sign form. Thus, images in general are icons, but languages register sound icons, in which the word that names beings or activities corresponds to the sound that the referents produce or even are, according to the varied cultural perceptions. Such a necessary link between referent and sign bypasses the Saussurean principle of arbitrariness and can occur on several levels. There is, for example, cosmological iconicity in which the sign

must contain characteristics related to cosmological conceptions held by the collective, often coming from mythological thinking (Bonfim 2018).

As alluded to earlier, the principle of *kenosis* demonstrates that the verb, when becoming flesh, also becomes an image, since, if it was invisible before, it now receives visibility via the body. The reference image of the body of Christ is not the divinity, which he divests himself of, according to Pauline explanations, but humanity. The bodily manifestation of Christ has no complete stability, as shown by the passages of the transfiguration and the multiple bodies in which he presents himself after the resurrection, being confused for a gardener by Mary Magdalene or even not being recognized by the most intimate followers, causing St. Tomé asks him for proof of presenting himself with the body bearing the stigmata. Thus, in the appearances between the resurrection and the ascension, despite having a corporeal form, Christ was only recognized by the way he spoke and treated the disciples, that is, the attributes of the person of Jesus. Among such attributes is the identification as sick, poor, hungry, thirsty, according to the principle of “Was It You, Lord?”, a relation of similarity or iconicity that is realized by the similar ontological condition, making it possible for the images of those in need to serve as figuration of the image of the messiah. Thus, there is the cosmological iconicity that allows the image of Christ to function as a floating icon, in a constant transfiguration process.

If the Jesus enculturated in the ghetto refers to references built in pop art, the other hypostases of Christ brought by Mangueira are more directly linked to the aesthetic forms of the political demands of social movements, which use the grammar of public religion to denounce and contest rights violations. In the “economy of incarnation” of counter-messianisms, the green-and-pink parade features the drum section queen Evelyn Bastos, a somewhat uncommon hypostasis both due to the intersectionality (woman and black) and the feminist struggle to associate women with the so-called sacred feminine of pre-Christian pagan world or even put in place of God the Father, as in the recent album by another 2020 carnival honouree, the Brazilian singer Elza Soares.⁸

8. With the theme ‘Elza Deusa Soares’, Mocidade Independente de Padre Miguel paid tribute to the 90th birthday of the singer from Rio de Janeiro, who was born in the neighborhood that gives the club its name, in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Created by carnival artist Jack Vasconcelos, the parade took the Padre Miguel school to third place.

FIGURE 8

Cover of the album
"God is Woman"
("Deus É Mulher"),
released in 2018.

Source: Reproduction.

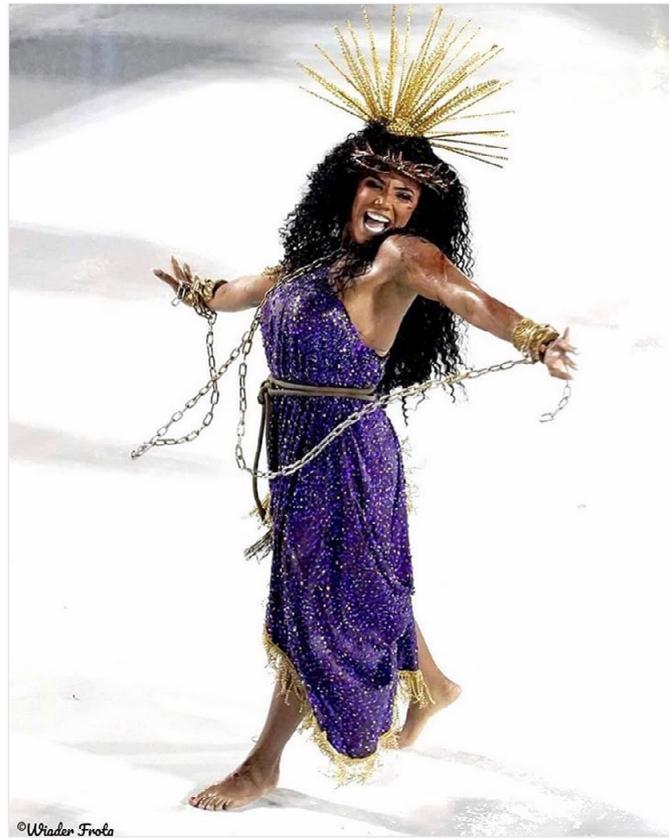


In the performance of Jesus elaborated by Evelyn Bastos, the artist chose to exclude samba steps from the presentation, bringing more restrained movements, which were present during the parade in the attitude of other biblical characters personified by samba strongholds, such as the singer Alcione, interpreting Mary, and Nelson Sargento, as Joseph. Both paraded in the school's open-wing car, in front of the baby Jesus sculpture, which, although black, was baroquely dressed.

Evelyn's concern seeks to circumvent the accusation of lack of respect directed towards the counter-messianic performances by critics, mainly from the leaders of evangelical denominations, the high Catholic hierarchy, and conservative parliamentarians. Regarding the 2015 Gay Pride Parade Jesus, as previously mentioned, Luna (2017) comments that 26 speeches were given in the Brazilian Parliament against the act, qualifying it as disrespectful, profane, and liable to be framed as vilification of religious symbols. Note, however, that the speeches do not point out what would configure the sacrilege, leading to the conclusion that the desecration is in the very form of the figuration itself, the divergent body of the canonical model.

FIGURE 9

The personification of Christ by the drum section queen Evleyn Bastos, who chose not to perform the samba dance during the parade. Photo: Wigder Frota.



The counterpart of counter-messianism appears with more emphasis in the parade in the figure of the Roman Empire, ultimately responsible for executing Christ and subsequently persecuting the disciples, the first Christians. The drum orchestra (battery), dressed in “Roman Brutality”, highlights the oppression by physical force and the economic power of Rome over the vassal peoples. The martyrdoms promoted by the imperial persecutory waves correspond in the parade to the problem of religious intolerance, imaged as the cross, which “comes to symbolize the martyrdom of minority groups, or those in situations of social vulnerability that, within the artistic proposal of the plot, come to present themselves as possible faces for the figure of Jesus” (LAA). Thus, both the body of Christ and the instrument of torture itself, the cross, are floating icons, capable of carrying the relationship of meaning between executioner and victim in the story of the passion.

The choice of the *Baianas* wing to prefigure religious intolerance is not fortuitous within the current history of religious conflicts in Brazil. “It is in this context that the *Baianas* wing and their costumes are clearly inspired by the signs that refer to the universe of religions of African origin. Unsurprisingly, the rising tide of religious intolerance is causing

victims, spreading fear and oppression” (LAA). The argumentation of the costumes of the Bahian women suggests the reversal of roles, with the Christians, once persecuted, taking the place of executioner, assumedly due to malpractices in the interpretation of biblical teachings. “It is extremely important to say that many of these intolerant practices are encouraged, above all, due to the distortion of Christian values that were domesticated to meet interests associated with practices of domination of peoples and territories”, says the carnival artist (LAA).

Such a perception of who occupies the present-day position of martyrs, despite attempts to affirm the existence of Christophobia by Christian leaders who support the federal government, who even take religious affiliation as a criterion for the occupation of public office, as in the recent confirmation of the evangelical André Mendonça to the Federal Supreme Court,⁹ finds discursive resonance in other critical images of the relationship between the religious and the political in the public sphere. The following cartoon by Vitor Teixeira, released in 2015, the year of inflection that is being taken as a reference in the article, refers to the initiative called “altar gladiators”, promoted by the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – UCKG).

FIGURE 10

The cartoon seeks to show the face of religious intolerance with a drawing which features a member of the *Gladiadores do Altar* (Altar Gladiators) group driving a sword into the body of a believer of Afro-Brazilian religion. Source: Reproduction.



9. Confirmation made by parliament in December 2021. Mendonça had been Attorney General of the Union appointed by President Jair Bolsonaro. The expectation of an evangelical name has existed since the previous vacancy in the STF, and had been demanded by supporters of the president, such as the pastor of the Assembly of God church Silas Malafaia. The confirmation of Mendonça was celebrated by the first lady, Michele Bolsonaro, with prayers in tongues or glossolalia, showing the particular articulation between the religious and the political presented by the current government, especially with the incorporation of ritual forms typical of pneumatic Christianity to political daily life. See Bonfim (2020) for the charismatic ritual importance of laying on of hands in building presidential charisma.

FIGURE 11

With the title “Intolerance is a Cross”, the costume of the *Baiana’s* wing of Mangueira samba school represents, in the words of the carnival artist Leandro Vieira, “by presenting the Bahian women from Estação Primeira – who bear the signs and insignia characteristic of the cults and customs of Afro origins – as a possible poetic extension of the body of the one who founds Christian values, we intended to raise awareness that the image that serves as a model of virtue and dignity for those who present themselves as ‘good citizens’ holds more similarity with the profile of those who are subjugated to the condition of the oppressed than with those who practice oppression” (LAA). Photo: Wigder Frota.



The cartoon (Figure 11) resumes the aforementioned imaginary about the Early Christian Church, when Christians were persecuted by the secular power under the aegis of Caesar. However, elements of Roman clothing, the helmet and the sword, are mixed with contemporary clothing, updating the figure of the gladiator, with the Christian symbol of the Divine Holy Spirit (inside the red heart, as used by the Universal Church) being carried by the executor of people practicing other religions, equivalent to the Christian martyrs who, ultimately, followed the sacrificial model of Christ himself. Interestingly, the Universal Church’s argument that the *Gladiadores do Altar* project was about performance – the same claim of the LGBT movement for the crucifixion of transsexuals and an important component of the church’s religiosity, according to Campos (1997) – was ignored by the articles that dealt with the subject and by the opinion of politicians such as the then federal deputy of the PSOL for Rio de Janeiro Jean Wyllys, who saw in the initiative the beginning of the formation of religious terrorist militias such as those existing in the Middle East. Wyllys had to resign from his mandate after Bolsonaro’s ascension to the Presidency of the Republic due to receiving death threats, leading him to self-exile.

Despite the claims made by the neo-Pentecostal denomination that the military metaphor is common in institutions with peaceful purposes such as the Salvation Army and the Scout Movement, the meaning effect

obtained concerns literality, with the cartoon not only depicting only symbolic oppression of evangelicals over the adepts of Afro-Brazilian religions with the spiritual warfare theology, but rather visually prophesying the coming deaths of elderly priestesses at the hands of the Christian Empire. Currently, Edir Macedo, leader of the UCKG, is one of the main supporters of the government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, having been a decisive element in the 2018 election by declaring support on the eve of the first round (Nascimento 2019). In Mangueira's samba-plot, the president appears as "the messiah with a gun in his hand" that raises the emergence of counter-messianic figures and figurations that put the narrative about who would be the liberator of the Brazilian people again in dispute.

Note that the counter-messianisms arise with the consolidation of what Pierucci (2004) calls a "turning point": the decrease of the country's reference religious traditions in favour of the expansion of the so-called evangelical denominations. Both Catholicism, which remains a major organizing force in Brazilian society even after the end of the *Padroado*, and Umbanda, the Brazilian religion par excellence celebrated for the syncretic components that make it up, have shown a decrease in the number of adherents since the 2000 census, analysed by the author. Catholic leadership, for example, has been replaced by a coalition with evangelical forces, as demonstrated by the support of the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, Dom Orani Tempesta, to the candidacy of the former bishop of the Universal Church, Marcelo Crivella, and of the founders of the *Canção* community, Nova, among other Catholic charismatic leadership to Jair Bolsonaro, even supporting spiritual provisions such as the laying on of hands for the anointing by evangelical leaders to consecrate the investiture of the retired military to the position of president (Bonfim 2020). Regarding to iconoclashes occurred on Carioca Carnival events, they no longer had the Roman Curia as its main antagonist as in the emblematic case of Beija-Flor in 1989. Now, the opposition comes from broad sectors of society, as seen by the controversy over the handing over of the key to king Momo, which triggers a series of countermeasures and adverse propaganda to the samba school parades by the municipality of Rio de Janeiro (Bonfim 2019).

4. APOTHEOSIS

Preceded by the wing called "*Bandido Morto*" (Dead Criminal), the float¹⁰ "*O Calvário*" (The Calvary) expands a non-verbal discourse by bringing

10. We deal here with the concept of allegory according to Cavalcanti (2012, 166): "Allegory is a native term that designates the immense objects that make up the unfolding of contemporary ritual performances of Bumbá de Parintins and the Carnival of Rio's samba

components representing the various physically or symbolically “crucified” bodies. Components on the mirror-adorned crosses embodied “The Multiple Faces for the Sorrows of Christ”, in which they presented characterizations such as paintings or pieces of clothing to highlight the representation of indigenous people, blacks, women, and LGBTQIs+.

FIGURE 12

With the crosses in mirror, components paraded representing the many faces of Christ’s pain. The crosses bore the inscription “Only Love”. Photo: Wigder Frota.



In the foreground of the allegory, a sculpture brought the image of a young black man, with platinum hair, crucified and shot by bullets. In place of the INRI inscription (Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum, which means Jesus Nazarene King of the Jews), came the word “BLACK”. As a garment, the “*mangueirense*” Christ used only a piece of cloth in green and pink, colours of the association. In the verbal speech to describe the allegory to the jurors, the carnival artist explains that:

In the highlighted cross, he is the face and body of a young black man. The idea is to raise a reflection on black mortality expressed in the rates of lethal violence resulting from a society founded on racism and discriminatory security

schools. They challenge the spectator, taking the place of vision in these shows to paroxysm: they are built for ritual enjoyment. They exist to be consumed and destroyed in that act”.

policies. Of every 100 people murdered in Brazil, 71 are black. Blacks – especially young black men, like the face of Christ that we present here – are the most frequent profile of homicide in Brazil, being much more vulnerable to violence than non-black youth (LAA).

FIGURE 13

The image of the black Christ crucified and the proportion compared with the scenic space of the Avenue: the grandeur of the sculpture puts the highlighted figure in the foreground, emphasizing the expression of the young man with his face turned to the heavens. Photo: Wigder Frota.



The Mangueira's parade shows how the grammar of public religion, currently tainted with the syntax of evangelical Christianity, but previously composed of numerous elements of popular Catholicism, continues to serve as a reference for non-verbal contestation discourses, even within apparently profane enunciative regimes such as the carnivalesque, since from the 'cross you can make splendour' as samba sings.

"The allegory is the symbolic "altar" that elevates the component in its passage through the Avenue, guiding its presentation in a procession, in a procession in which the "faithful" – represented by the components that form the wings or integrate the allegory with their fantasies – prostrate at the feet of a "divinity" taken to the heights" (Sousa 2018, 73). In this case, the apotheosis of the multiple transfigurations of Christ happens

by their own kenosis, as the green-pink visual gospel is happy to leave the synoptic vision when celebrating the non-hegemonic bodies of Jesus.

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