

Colonial Carnavalesque: Transgressing Normativities and Gender Performance in Mozambique¹

Caio Simões de Araújo

Draft. Please do not cite or circulate.

Carnival has been a recurrent topic in contemporary social sciences and literary studies, at least in part thanks to the translation and wider circulation of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic.² Drawing on the writing of François Rabelais, Bakhtin formulated an influential reading of carnival festivals in medieval and Renaissance Europe as extraordinary events, in which the dominant cultural order and the social hierarchies it both required and reproduced were transgressed, subverted, and disrupted. During carnival time, there was “a temporal suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers, (...) norms and prohibitions”, thus allowing a “liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order”.³ While grounded in European history and in the politics of an increasingly dogmatic Stalinism (against which Bakhtin was writing),⁴ a “theory of the carnivalesque as a populist, utopian vision of the world seen from below”⁵ has been taken up by scholars and applied to a variety of contexts and situations. In this sense, carnival is “not simply as a ritual feature of European culture but (...) a *mode of understanding*, (...) a cultural analytic.”⁶ Insofar as it is a practice of transgression repeated in time and present in virtually every society, carnival can be said to be “transtemporal and universal” and, in a way, “out of history.”⁷

But it is, too, deeply historical. Some critics have cautioned that, as a general theory or a concept, carnival has been “over-utilized”.⁸ Other scholars have averted generalisation by suggesting that we need “a close historical examination of (the) particular conjunctures”

¹ The research for this paper has been supported by the Governing Intimacies project, by the GALA Queer Archive, and by the Open Society University Network.

² Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. See also: Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 10 and 15-16.

⁴ Lachmann, Renate (1988/1989). “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture”. *Cultural Critique*, 11, 115-152.

⁵ Stallybrass, Peter and White, Alan (1986). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 7.

⁶ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 6.

⁷ Lachmann, “Bakhtin and Carnival”, 123 and 151.

⁸ Webb, Darren (2005). “Bakhtin at the Seaside: Utopia, Modernity and the Carnavalesque”. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(3), 121.

in which carnivalesque practices are performed.⁹ Vicki Cremona has recently demonstrated that carnival play is shaped by the “specific historical and socio-political circumstances of (...) particular (communities).”¹⁰ In this line of enquiry, carnival – as a concept and as an object of historical enquiry – has been especially relevant in contexts where it is embedded in the social fabric, such as Latin America and the Caribbean, or in contexts “where the political difference between the dominant and subordinate culture is particularly charged”, such as (post)colonial societies in general.¹¹ In Africa, most of the literature has concentrated on the *Kaapse Klopse* of Cape Town, and on the former Portuguese colonies, particularly Angola.¹² This focus on Lusophone Africa may be explained by the fact that carnival was more commonly celebrated in colonial societies with stronger Catholic traditions.¹³ Even then, no dedicated study of the festivities in Mozambique exists. In my view, this has to do less with specificities of the context – where, indeed, the festival was celebrated for most of the 20th century – and more with the scholarly imagination of carnival as an Atlantic phenomenon.¹⁴

In this paper, I want to make two interventions. Firstly, I intend to fill the gap in the literature and sketch a history of carnival in late colonial Lourenço Marques (contemporary Maputo), capital of Mozambique. Secondly, I want to do so by mobilizing queer theory and interrogating how engaging the carnival may contribute to histories of dissident sexuality and gender non-conformity. This is important, I argue, because much of the scholarship on

⁹ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 16.

¹⁰ Cremona, Vicki Ann (2018). *Carnival & Power: Play and Politics in a Crown Colony*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 11.

¹² On Cape Town, see: Davids, N. (2018). “‘It is us’: an exploration of ‘race’ and place in the Cape Town Minstrel Carnival”. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 57(2), 86-101. Gregory, Jonathan (2018). *A musical ethnography of the Kaapse Klopse carnival in Cape Town, South Africa*. PhD Diss., University of Belfast. Martin, Denis-Constant (1999). *Coon Carnival: New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present*. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers. On Lusophone Africa, see: Birmingham, David (1988). “Carnival at Luanda”, *Journal of African History*, 29, 93-103. Almeida, Marco Hemingway (2014). *O Carnaval Angolano e a Construção da Identidade Nacional*. BA Thesis, Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira. Carvalho, T. (1999). “Quem me dera ser onda: carnavalização e utopia”. *Cadernos Cespuc de Pesquisa*, 6, 76-85. Oliveira e Gabarra, Larissa and Moreira Focna, Salomão (2019). “Carnaval do Ntudurú: diversidade cultural e identidade nacional”. *Tensões Mundiais*, 15(29), 119-142. Marzano, Andrea (2016). “Nossa Dança, Nossos Pais, Nossos Filhos: Apontamentos para uma História Social do Carnaval Luandense”, *Revista TEL*, 7(2), 67-88. Carvalho, Ruy Duarte (1989). *Ana a Manda: os filhos da rede*. Lisboa: IICT. Kohl, Christoph (2018). “The Colonial State and Carnival: The Complexity and Ambiguity of Carnival in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa”. *Social Analysis*, 62(2), 126-149.

¹³ Cremona, *Carnival & Power*, 2.

¹⁴ Crichlow, Michaeline A. and Armstrong, Piers (2010). “Carnival Praxis, carnivalesque strategies and Atlantic interstices”. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation, and Culture*, 16(4), 399-414. Armstrong, Piers (2010). “Bahian carnival and social carnivalesque in trans-Atlantic context”. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation, and Culture*, 16(4), 447-469.

gender in Southern Africa has focused on studying the making of gender regimes over time, looking at the ways in which men and women are historically situated as historical subjects, whose identities and positionalities are shaped by medical, labour, and cultural systems, to name just a few. Here, I am interested in imagining what kind of queer history we can tell if we focus instead in events and moments of transgression and gender-bending, in acts that destabilize rather than reinforce dominant sexual cultures and normative gender regimes, such as, presumably, carnival festivities. I will demonstrate that, as elsewhere, in Lourenço Marques the carnival could be a potentially liberatory moment of sexual experimentation and cross-gender performance, despite all limitations and constraints the colonial situation necessarily implied. Looking at the carnival, I suggest, allows us to reorient our attention from normative gender regimes and disciplines of sexuality, to privilege instead those forms of disruption and liberation that are produced through the body in motion, dancing in disguise or masquerade, in what Ananya Kabir has called the “alegropolitics” of the dance floor. In addition, thinking with the carnival raises crucial questions regarding temporality in history writing: as an event, a disruptive moment in time, it highlights the tensions between continuity and discontinuity, and between transgression and normativity.

Power and Play: Carnival, Gender Transgression, and Colonial (Chrono)Normativity

Carnival is, by definition, an intrinsically temporal affair. It is, after all, a temporally bounded moment of disruption of dominant culture and social norms; of collective play and catharsis; of corporal freedom and utopic possibility. Its popular appeal and symbolic power is derived precisely from the frictions it introduces between the “sacral” time of the state and its heroes, on the one hand, and the “profane” time of daily life, the everyday of the ordinary people, on the other.¹⁵ As a periodic festival, medieval carnival was based on the cyclical rhythms of folk culture, in subversion of “the linear and finalistic parameters (of) official institutions.”¹⁶ While the rise of European colonial modernity and its linear conceptions of time have coincided with the “death of carnival” as a popular festivity, carnivalesque practices of transgression have been transcoded, displaced, into bourgeois (and colonial)

¹⁵ Lachmann, *Bakhtin and Carnival*, 117-118.

¹⁶ Lachmann, *Bakhtin and Carnival*, 132-133.

cultures,¹⁷ commonly in association to new pleasure economies and the entertainment industry.¹⁸ To this day, the carnivalesque act is said to open a “window of opportunity” – a temporal incision in the linear time of politics and history –, constituting a counter-discourse, and a counterculture, against which bourgeois discourses and dominant social identities are delineated.¹⁹

In order to *queer* these histories of carnival, I want to turn to Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performative. Drawing on feminist theory and Foucauldian sexuality studies, Butler has influentially argued that gender is socially constructed - over time - through performance, speech acts, and discursive regimes. Destabilising the sex/gender distinctions of conventional feminist critique, Butler analyses the relational construction of sex, gender, sexual identities, and desires through regulatory practices that sediment both heterosexuality and the gender binary as normative, socially sanctioned, and compulsory.²⁰ Temporality is crucial to this ways in which sexual difference and gender identity are naturalized, and inscribed onto the body. As Butler describes it: “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.”²¹ In the last few years, queer theorists have drawn on this insight to elaborate on the temporal politics of sexuality. Elizabeth Freeman has coined the term “chrononormativity” to describe how bodies and lives are disciplined into particular temporal regimes of productivity surrounding labour, family life, physical health, citizenship, and son on, from the calendar work day to the heterosexual marriage and reproduction as a biographical markers.²²

There are strong similarities between carnival studies’ conceptualization of dominant culture and queer theory’s understanding of heteronormativity, both of which are expressed in linear temporal regimes that regulate bodies and shape subject formation. Likewise, in both cases, there is potential of (temporary) subversion through carnivalesque practices and queer modalities of parody and critique. Drag and cross-dressing, for instance, may be troubling to naturalised gender dichotomies, as they expose the “performativity” of

¹⁷ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 178.

¹⁸ Webb, “Bakhtin at the Seaside”, 128.

¹⁹ Bruner, M. Lane (2005). “Carnavalesque Protest and the Humourless State”, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 25(2), 136-155.

²⁰ Butler, Judith (2006). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge), 24.

²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

²² Freeman, Elizabeth (2010). *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.

gender.²³ Carnival, by the same token, “retextualises” the social and reveals its “‘fictive’ foundations”.²⁴ Yet, critics have also cautioned against a romantic reading that may exaggerate the utopian, radical, and transformative potential of these practices, affirming instead that they may reinforce political and heteronormative orders. As a moment of “licensed release”, carnival may work as a form of social control that serves the interests of the dominant culture it intends to disrupt.²⁵ After all, once the party ends, it “ultimately leaves everything as it was before.”²⁶ Queer parody and drag are also not necessarily subversive, but “may become domesticated and rearticulated as instruments of cultural hegemony.”²⁷ Other authors have gone beyond a simplistic dichotomy between transformative or conservative politics, to argue that “carnival is a site of struggle,”²⁸ and hence any analysis requires its careful contextualisation in particular social situations and in specific configurations of power. In this paper, I want to follow this line of enquiry and look at the carnival in Lourenço Marques – and the instances of gender transgression within it – as ambivalent, contradictory, assemblages of practices and political dispositions, in which desire for subversion and play rubbed against – as much as the bodies of carnival goers – the policing of the colonial boundaries of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Masquerades of Whiteness: Settler Colonialism, Respectability, and Carnival Culture

In the early 1950s, Carnival in Lourenço Marques was a lukewarm affair. In the press, several commentators lamented this perceived state of decline, at times referring to a more glorious past of carnival festivities in the early 20th century, at times reflecting on the political and social temper of the mid-century as a disenchanted, sombre, reality. As one observer put it, the “disappearance of carnival” evidenced that the modern man had “lost the will to live”, as he was “dominated by the preoccupations of the everyday”, without time to rest, or even to “think of carnival parties.”²⁹ Another article noted that carnival was as old as humanity, as men had always had the “desire to enjoy, as intensely as possible, the

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 187.

²⁴ Eagleton, Terry (1981). *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London: Verso.

²⁵ Stallybass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 13.

²⁶ Lachmann, *Bakhtin and Carnival*, 125.

²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 189.

²⁸ Cremona, *Carnival & Power*, 6.

²⁹ “Nota do dia”, *Notícias*, 17 February 1953.

delights that life had to offer.” Yet, it asked, why is it that “the men of our time no longer masquerade themselves, to reveal themselves just as they are?”³⁰ The general opinion was that “the street carnival, the unruly carnival, the immoral carnival”, was anything but dead, because people were no longer allowed to incur in “improper”, “less dignified”, acts.³¹ As the “period of license” in which “everything that a crazy imagination can come up with” was fair play, carnival was no longer.³² Notwithstanding these pessimist comments, the 1950s also saw a renewed investment in the festivity (and the policing of its limits), from the colonial state and the public alike. Mentioning a longing for moments of “collective joy”, for a period when “social classes got together in the same party”, a commentator was convinced that the “carnival must not die”.³³ In my view, all these considerations attest the tensions around imaginations and practices of carnival in late colonial society, in which the festivities were celebrated, desired, in their potential as moment of release and collective play, but also undermined by the dictates of settler sociability, with its rules of status, distinction, and respectability. While some of these tensions persisted until independence, in 1975, the late colonial period witnessed the blossoming of a rich carnival culture. Even in the mid-1950s, when many saw the festival as “sickly” and lacking enthusiasm, many carnival balls reported “extraordinary attendance.”³⁴

The history of colonial carnival needs to be resituated within a broader transformation and expansion of entertainment and leisure industries in Lourenço Marques. While the capital had been known for its vibrant “tavern economy” since the early 20th century,³⁵ the post-war period brought about unprecedented public (and private) investment in leisure infrastructure in Mozambique’s cities. This was catalysed by a colonial policy of promoting economic growth and encouraging white settlement,³⁶ with increasing numbers

³⁰ “O eterno carnaval”, *Notícias*, 6 February 1951.

³¹ “Nota do dia”, *Notícias*, 17 February 1953.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ “O Carnaval vai morrer?”, *Notícias*, 9 February 1955.

³⁴ “Chegou o Carnaval e a cidade diverte-se”, *Notícias*, 20 February 1955.

³⁵ MacDonald, Andrew (2012), *Colonial Trespassers in the Making of South Africa’s International Borders 1900 to c. 1950*, PhD Diss., St John’s College, Cambridge. Zamparoni, Vlademir (1998), ‘Entre Narros & Mulungos: Colonialismo e Paisagem Social em Lourenço Marques, c. 1890-1940’, PhD Diss., University of São Paulo, São Paulo.

³⁶ Castelo, Cláudia (2007). *Passagens para África. O povoamento de Angola e Moçambique com Naturais da Metrópole (1920-1974)*. Porto: Afrontamento. Penvenne, Jeanne Marie (2005). “Settling against the tide: the layered contradictions of twentieth century Portuguese settlement in Mozambique”. In Elkins, C. and Pederson, S. (Eds). *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices and Legacies*. New York: Routledge. Jerónimo, Miguel Bandeira (2018), ‘Repressive Developmentalisms: Idioms, Repertoires, Trajectories in Late

of Portuguese migrants arriving every year. The majority of these recent arrivals settled on cities, where they joined a growing middle class working in services, commerce, and public administration.³⁷ To attend this urban clientele – which included, too an emerging black and mixed race middle class³⁸ – the pleasure economy expanded significantly to include cafes, bars, cabarets, dance clubs, hotels, camping grounds, seaside businesses, and the like. The tourist mobility from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, whose seasonal visitors arrived in Mozambique in large numbers, also contributed to the quick growth of leisure economies.³⁹ The late colonial investment in carnival was, thus, intimately related to these developments in local and regional consumer publics, tastes, and expectations. In the mid-1950s, an article urged the state and private businesses to attend to the economic promise and tourist potential of carnival, by promoting parades and spectacles that could attract local and regional visitors. If that was done, it was argued, the carnival could “earn fame... and money!”.⁴⁰ In the 1960s, the “LM Carnival” was advertised in South Africa.

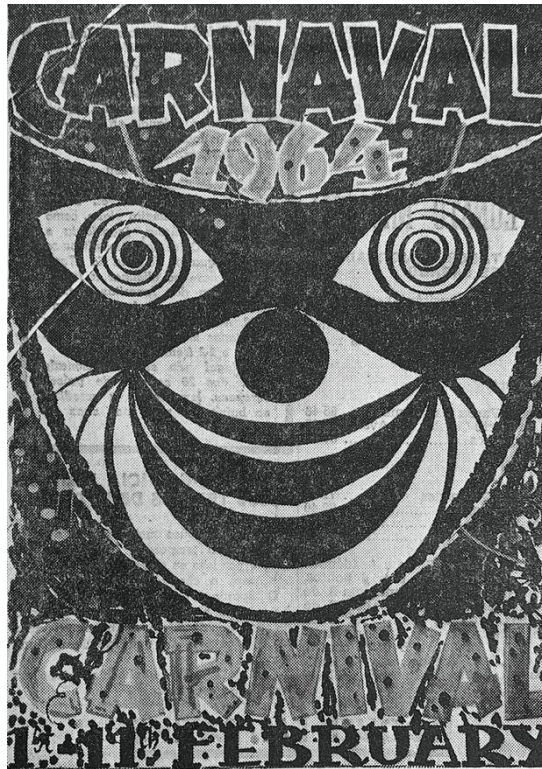
Colonialism’, In Thompson, A. and M. Thomas (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on the Ends of Empires*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 537–554.

³⁷ Castelo, *Passagens para África*.

³⁸ Havstad, Lily (2019). “‘To Live a Better Life’: the Making of a Mozambican Middle Class’, PhD Diss., Boston University, Boston.

³⁹ Morton, D. (2015), ‘A Voortrekker Memorial in Revolutionary Maputo’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41(2), 335-352. Coelho, C. A. (1973), ‘Elementos Estatísticos: Moçambique’, *Finisterra*, 8(15): 145-161.

⁴⁰ “O que poderia ser o carnaval em Lourenço Marques”, *Notícias*, 18 February 1955.



1964 Carnival Poster, advertised in South Africa.

That colonial carnival was entangled with the modern entertainment industry raised some important questions. For one, it mimics the longer history of commodification of the festival in Europe, where its primordial “spirit of freedom” gave way to a “mere holiday mood.”⁴¹ As no longer a subversive moment but a cultural product for entertainment, carnival belongs to a broader history of leisure in colonial societies. As Phyllis Martin has argued, colonial leisure was a modern technology of power that regulated workers’ time and everyday rhythms, while also demarcating the boundaries of racial and class distinction. European leisure activities, for instance, could be markers of status and performative acts that distinguished “the whites” as an exclusive racial community.⁴² Rather than self-evident or natural these boundaries required careful supervision and negotiation, constantly bringing into question notions of race, gender, class and sexuality. Leisure activities could potentially spark off tensions, expose the gendered and classed fractions within society, and ultimately reveal that “the whites” as a homogenous community did not exist but as an abstraction.⁴³ As Ann Stoler has argued, colonial notions of morality and respectability were crucial in policing the boundaries of whiteness and, in doing so, legitimising settler privilege

⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 33.

⁴² Martin, Phyllis M. (1995). *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*. Cambridge: University Press.

⁴³ Ibid.

and rule.⁴⁴ Colonial carnival could also be a moment of moral policing and boundary making. An opinion written by columnist Maria Pacóvia is illustrative. In it, Pacóvia described going around the city, with her husband, to observe the festivities (not to participate in them). Noticing a certain lack of enthusiasm, she concluded: "It's a pity that we have such few opportunities to enjoy ourselves (...) without everyone whispering about it. We, the Portuguese, (...) are so afraid of the horrid 'it looks bad', so catty in our criticism, that we turn any party into a funeral."⁴⁵ Pacóvia's comments alerts us to the self-policing of settler morality, but it also illustrates carnival's depoliticisation as a "spectacle" readily available for the "voyeuristic" consumption by the bourgeois self.⁴⁶

Social policing was not only a matter of whispers and dirty looks, but was also carried through economic inequality and state power. Colonial carnival was fractured along the lines of difference inherent in settler society. The carnival of "the city" was staged in selective clubs and hotels, subject to hefty entrance fees and, therefore, mostly attended by the white settler population. The carnival of "the suburbs", on the other hand, could take place in public spaces and in clubs and associations located in black-majority neighbourhoods, such as Mafalala, Alto Maé, Xipamanine and Malhangalene.⁴⁷ The *Avenida de Angola* cutting across the suburbs was a notorious stage of these popular carnival forms. In the early 1950s, a newspaper described a "spectacle offered by thousands of natives along the avenida de Angola, in their revelry and incredible characterisation, (with) dances and drums."⁴⁸ However, by the end of the decade, an article lamented the decline of that practice, urging the administration to again authorise the people to have "'their' carnival", without presence of the mounted police.⁴⁹ This comment was not unwarranted, as in this period the colonial state attempted to regulate and police the festivities in the name of public safety and morality. Police notices were published in the press to demarcate de lines of permissiveness and single out prohibited behaviour: this included using liquids and dust on other people, wearing masks on the street in a way that hid one's identity, and wearing costumes of the opposite sex and contrary to morality, such as parodies of public figures (such as politicians

⁴⁴ Stoler, Ann L. (2010). *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁴⁵ "Cu...cu!... Entrudooooo!", *Notícias*, 14 February 1961.

⁴⁶ Stallybass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 183.

⁴⁷ Interview with Manuela Soeiro, 10 October 2021, Maputo.

⁴⁸ "Terça-Feira de Carnaval", *Notícias*, 23 February 1950.

⁴⁹ "Breve Nota", *Notícias*, 08 February 1959.

and public servants).⁵⁰ However loosely these rules were enforced, they still illustrate the official attempt to regulate the festival not only for political reasons, as it has already been argued, but also for moral ones.⁵¹

Nowhere these tensions over morality were critiqued more clearly than in the writings of Guilherme de Melo, a journalist and editor-in-chief for *Notícias*, the country's leading daily newspaper. Melo was also widely known as one of the first gay men to live openly about their sexuality in Lourenço Marques, an experience he later explored in his fictionalised memoir, *A Sombra dos Dias*, published in Portugal, in 1981.⁵² He also wrote routinely for the paper in his front page column, which appeared in the popular Sunday edition. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Melo would write about the carnival while the festivities were unravelling, or, at least, around that time. In reading these texts, I found that masking and masquerade were common and recurrent themes. Melo describes the carnival as the only time where, sanctioned by the calendar, that "man decides to look at his neighbour and at himself, to acknowledge the mask they are wearing."⁵³ They do not realize, however, that of the "masks they meet daily, at the table at a cafe, on the seat of the bus, in the queue at the cinema."⁵⁴ For Melo, the temporal imagination of the carnival as a bounded event is what led people to believe that, after the party is over, a mask is removed, and one "returns to their place in the everyday."⁵⁵ For him, however, people lived in an "eternal masquerade" even after the carnival had officially ended. In his writings, he listed several (social) masks that go unnoticed in the everyday: from a woman who is charitable in public but slaps her servant in the face, to a husband who preaches strict morals and family values, but supports a lover in a second, secret, household. This suggests that Melo engaged the social practice of masquerade during the carnival to produce a critique of settler morality and hypocrisy as masking practices. His texts are filled with humorous renditions of settler bourgeois respectability, including by demonstrating its underlying racism and elitism, and exposing its only precarious, public, commitment to heterosexual marriage. In subverting the temporal boundary of carnival and taking it to the domain of the everyday, Melo's

⁵⁰ "Carnaval – Edital da Polícia", 17 February 1954.

⁵¹ This research has found ample evidence that cross-dressing was a common practice during the carnival, as I will show below. On the regulation for political reasons, related to the rise of anti-colonialism, see: Kohl, *The Colonial State and Carnival*.

⁵² Melo, Guilherme de (1981), *A Sombra dos Dias*. Lisbon: Bertrand and Círculo de Leitores.

⁵³ "O Grande Carnaval", *Notícias*, 20 February 1966.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "A Eterna Mascarada", *Notícias*, 28 February 1954.

writing is carnivalesque and queer, as it engages the “fictive”, constructed, nature of settler morality and its hetero-normative underpinnings. They show the possibility of re-politicising a carnival that was being policed by the state and co-opted by private investment. While Melo’s critique of the dominant order was restricted to the domain of language, others worked through more performative, corporeal, means.

Bodies of Freedom: Carnival as (Trans)National Queer Culture

In 1962, the carnival party in the Malhangalene neighbourhood had been advertised as “100% carioca”, meaning a night that would mimic the famous carnival of Rio de Janeiro, mostly by being animated by the Brazilian musicians Déo Maia and *Irmãos Guarás*. As it was later reported in the press, the “carnaval Carioca” had attracted “the biggest wave of people ever seen”, as a “great multitude” partied all night, until the sunrise.⁵⁶ I am mentioning this particular party to make two points. First, that carnival festivities seemed to have taken off in the 1960s in Lourenço Marques, with parties, parades, and contests being organized both by the city government and by private initiative, in increasing numbers and ever more ambitious arrangements.⁵⁷ Second, to show that carnival was rapidly becoming a transnational affair, as it was increasingly mediated by mass culture and shaped by the circulation of imaginaries and musical tastes in the Lusophone world, especially considering the international projection of the Rio carnival as perhaps the epitome of the festivity. This is important because histories of carnival and of music have conventionally been told in relation to national formations, and in the context of the emergence of (anti-colonial) nationalism and processes of consolidation of national identities.⁵⁸ While these are, surely, relevant frame of analysis, I suggest that thinking with carnival as transnational culture may

⁵⁶ “A maior enchente de sempre no carnaval da Malhangalene”, 5 March 1962.

⁵⁷ This differs greatly from other Portuguese colonies, such as Guinea-Bissau and Angola, where carnival was highly policed, when not outright forbidden, by the state, in the early 1960s, mostly due to security concerns related to the start of the colonial war in Angola, in 1961, and Guinea-Bissau, in 1963. See: Kohl, *The Colonial State and Carnival*. Moorman, Marisa (2008). *Intonations: a Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times*. Athens: Ohio University Press. While the war in Mozambique started in 1964, the fact that the most of the military conflict unfolded in the north, far away from Lourenço Marques, may have protected the carnival from excessive state interference.

⁵⁸ Moorman, *Intonations*. Filipe, E. P. V. (2012). “Where are the Mozambican Musicians?:” *Music, Marrabenta, and National Identity in Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, 1950s-1975*. PhD Thesis, University of Minnesota. Vianna, Hermano (1999). *The mystery of Samba: Popular Music & National Identity in Brazil*. Chapel Hill and London: the University of North Carolina Press.

alert us to forms of cultural critique and liberatory practice that bypasses some of the inherent exclusions of nationalist discourse and history, particularly in terms of minoritized subjectivities – such as queers and gender non-conforming folks – that are commonly denied national belonging. This is, of course, not to suggest that in the carnival no forms of national identification were being staged, but simply to point out that friction, ambivalence, and complementarity was at play.

These complex dynamics are revealed in the life itinerances of the actress, playwright and theatre director Manuela Soeiro. Born in Lourenço Marques in a diverse family, she spent her childhood in a religious school run by nuns. She recalls learning “Portuguese by force” and being constantly called a “mulata” due to her mixed race background. In her youth, she lived in Pemba, Cabo Delgado, where she was fascinated by mapiko masquerade and dance, which is a strongly rooted cultural practice in that area.⁵⁹ She later lived in Vila Pery (Chimoio), close to the Southern Rhodesian border, before returning to Lourenço Marques in the 1960s, when she was in her 20s. Her youth was one of trying to navigate a white settler society that could be at times hostile and unforgiving. In response, she adopted practices of self-fashioning such as wearing mini-skirts and long boots, which carried the promise of modernity and precarious inclusion. But she never lost her affinity and fascination for distinctively African cultural forms, even though, she acknowledges, she did so without clear political consciousness. She recalls a situation that is worth repeating. In her youth, she gathered a group of Portuguese girls, and introduced them to mapiko dance and characterisation (including distinctive mapiko masks), intending to enter that performance in a carnival competition. Even if her peers could barely “lift their legs”, they made quite an impression. The mostly white audience, “not knowing what that was, went crazy over it, because that was very beautiful.” They won the first prize, celebrating with roast goat and wine. The party was cut short, when she was approached by a man from the notoriously brutal Secret Police, asking her to present herself, as the ringleader, to their office first thing in the morning. The next day, she had to convince them of her naiveté, her lack of political consciousness in engaging with a cultural practice often associated with anti-colonial sentiment. “How was it that I, at that time, being so young, dared to show Mozambique? I danced marrabenta, I danced mapiko, and on top of it, with this skin colour.” Manuela’s

⁵⁹ For more on mapiko, see: Israel, Paolo (2014). *In Step with the Times: Mapiko Masquarades of Mozambique* (Athens: Ohio University Press).

narrative is instructive of, once again, the policing of carnival under settler colonial rule, and also of the politicisation of dance, music, and performance, even if she reiterates that she had “no political consciousness.”⁶⁰ What she had, she explains, was a deep sense of national identity and belonging, rooted in a Mozambican culture that not necessarily found space of expression under (white) settler hegemony.

This story resonates with the association, mentioned above, between music, carnival, and nationhood. But Manuela’s narrative also pushes us into new directions. Upon returning to Lourenço Marques in the mid-1960s, she found a vibrant carnival culture, richer and more diverse than anything she had experienced before. “We really lived the carnival”, she recalls: “we packed our stuff in a bag, and didn’t come back home (...). We just wanted to play the carnival.” She also explains:

And then there were the Brazilians, who came here to sing and dance. (...) It was such a lively thing. These were picturesque places, such as the African Association, places like Xipamanine, Alto-Maé, and then the clubs. It was no child’s play (...). That gave us, Africans, the possibility of feeling something that had to do with us, coming from abroad. Other things, that came from Portugal, they meant nothing to us, even though we spoke Portuguese. But the music that we listened to on the radio, it was Brazilian, we knew all the Brazilian songs (...) Eêê! They were ours. Sometimes we didn’t understand all the words, but the music, it had to do with us. (...) It was easy to get into the rhythm of samba. It wasn’t the same (as our Mozambican rhythms), but it was easy. It moved us. The drums, the *cuíca*.⁶¹

Manuela is alluding to a form of Southern cosmopolitanism and circulation of cultural (musical) forms that had developed in Mozambique since the 1940s, when the first exchanges and visits from Brazilian musicians had taken place, working to popularise *samba* in Lourenço Marques.⁶² Locally, samba was viewed as a black musical genre, and the presence of Brazilian musicians, and their performances in venues of different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, surely helped to elevate its status with local publics.⁶³ Manuela’s narrative implies that samba, and the practices of a Brazilian-like carnival, afforded Mozambicans the possibility of transnational belonging and claims of modernity that were

⁶⁰ Interview with Manuela Soeiro, 28 October 2021, Maputo.

⁶¹ Interview with Manuela Soeiro, 28 October 2021, Maputo. *Cuíca* is a friction drum used in samba.

⁶² Filipe, *Where are the Mozambican Musicians?*, 162-163.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

otherwise foreclosed by the racial exclusivity of white entertainment spaces. The carnival parties in “the city”, she explains, were held for “the elites”: “in the elite clubs, a black person couldn’t go in. And even someone who was mixed raced, they were allowed in only if they were married to a European, otherwise, no way.”⁶⁴ Some of the balls organized in luxury hotels, mirrored another carnival, mimicking a European tradition, such as the Venice masquerade. But, in the suburbs, it was mostly *samba*.⁶⁵



Advert for the Venice-style masquerade, *Notícias*.

⁶⁴ Interview with Manuela Soeiro, 28 October 2021, Maputo

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.



Advert for the Brazilian Carnival, *Notícias*, 1962.

The circulation of samba, from the Black Atlantic to East Africa, allowed forms of play, performance, and carnival pleasures that subverted the racially segregated, and Eurocentric, format of the settler, private, carnival party. As such, it offered the promise of liberation and freedom, although temporarily. In addition, I argue that the festivities also opened a space of experimentation for queer and gender non-conforming people, white and black alike. Again, the Brazilian connection was instrumental. In the late 1960s, Brazilian *travestis* mobilized the same transatlantic networks that musicians did. The ascending actress, singer, and performer Rogéria was perhaps the best-known example of this. Described by the popular magazine *O Cruzeiro*, in 1967, as “one of the best *travestis* who ever stepped on Brazilian stages,”⁶⁶ in 1970 she spent seven months in Luanda, Angola.⁶⁷ The success of her shows in Luanda got her an invitation to perform in Mozambique, first in Lourenço Marques, and later in Beira, where she landed a temporary job in the prestigious nightclub *Moulin*

⁶⁶ *O Cruzeiro* (1967), “Um Homem e uma Mulher”, *O Cruzeiro*, 48, p. 28.

⁶⁷ Paschoal, M. (2016), *Rogéria: uma mulher e mais um pouco*. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, p. 99.

Rouge.⁶⁸ Her short stay in Lourenço Marques left an impression. Downtown, the infamous *Rua Araújo* was known for its sensual attractions, including various modalities of cabaret performances and striptease, the glamorous dance numbers of *travesti* was a new, remarkable, addition.⁶⁹ Eduardo Pitta, who was born in a settler family and grew up in Lourenço Marques, recalls that Rogéria (and others he could not name) quickly rose to prominence in the urban scene.⁷⁰

Rogéria's rise to fame and her international projection onto Portuguese Africa need to be situated within broader transformations of urban queer culture on both sides of the Atlantic. In Brazil, practices of cross-dressing had been visible to the public eye since the early 20th century, during the carnival. But it was only in the 1950s that the figure of the *travesti* as a cultural agent started to take shape, as many of these performers found in showbusiness (theatre, radio, and film) a means to gain status and achieve upward social mobility.⁷¹ By cultivating an aesthetics of glamour and a hyper-feminine persona intended for public display – what Marcia Ochoa calls “spectacular femininity” –, *travestis* consolidated their art form as a valuable cultural commodity.⁷² In Brazil, the appeal of *travesti* shows to the general public had to do with their exotic, novel, and glamorous quality, but also with their embodiment of a cosmopolitan urban modernity that local elites tended to associate with places like Paris or New York.⁷³ I suggest that the circulation of *travesti* shows, as a transnational cultural form, had a similar impact in Lourenço Marques. As Guilherme de Melo put it in his memoir, “in the most expensive night clubs in town, [the *travesti*] shows, with sequin dresses and feathers, became a commodity that the entire high society desired.”⁷⁴ If this description, again, shows the class disparities within the colonial entertainment scene, carnival allowed cross-dressing to take the street in a more popularised manner.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101-102.

⁶⁹ Soliva, T. B. (2016), “Sob o símbolo do glamour: um estudo sobre homossexualidades, resistência e mudança social”, PhD Thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.

⁷⁰ Interview with Eduardo Pitta.

⁷¹ Soliva, T. B. (2016), “Sob o símbolo do glamour: um estudo sobre homossexualidades, resistência e mudança social”, PhD Thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, p. 67.

⁷² Soliva, *Ibid.*, p. 117. Ochoa, M. (2014). *Queens for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

⁷³ Soliva, *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁷⁴ Melo, *A Sombra*, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

NA BOITE PRIMAVERA
(A «BOITE» DOS GRANDES SHOWS)

MANTÉM-SE O GRANDE SUCESSO

ROGÉRIA

A GRANDE ATRACÇÃO DO
MOMENTO NA NOSSA CIDADE,
CONSIDERADO O MAIOR
«TRAVESTI» DE TODA A
AMÉRICA DO SUL

COMPLETANDO O SEU SHOW
a fadista
MARIA SILVESTRE
e a bailarina oriental
ZAMINA

Música pelo melhor conjunto em Moçambique
«LOS UNICOS»

Atenção às nossas matinées de 4.ªs-feiras e sábados

O AMBIENTE MAIS FINO E ACOLHEDOR DA CIDADE
Reservas de mesa pelo telefone 2476 — Ar condicionado

C. L. 18 846

Advert for the performance of Rogéria, described as “the greatest travesti of South America”, *Notícias*.

Indeed, a cross-dressing culture also featured in the carnival celebrations. By the end of the decade, balls during that period also hosted *travesti* competitions. As Miguel has noted, cross-dressing practices during the festivities could have been simply moments of entertainment for heterosexual men, in ways that did not subvert the homo/hetero binary.⁷⁵ But for gay-identifying men, this could also be a time for experimentation. As Green has suggested for Brazil, carnival afforded gay men a space to experience their sexual dissent or gender non-normativity in a manner that was both public and intensified.⁷⁶ This seems to have been the case in Lourenço Marques, too. While, here, a local cross-dressing culture had been secluded to the walls of mostly white private parties,⁷⁷ by the late 1960s it could exist more openly. Eduardo, for instance, started to cross-dress for the Carnival in 1969, a practice that he now sees as a playful experimentation with a culture of femininity.⁷⁸ This context

⁷⁵ Miguel, *Mariyapáxis*, op. cit., p. 111-112.

⁷⁶ Green, J. (1999). *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in twentieth-century Brazil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁷⁷ This is described at length in Guilherme de Melo’s novel.

⁷⁸ Interview with Eduardo Pitta.

could also present the possibility of trans-becoming, that is, of transgender practices that were more consequential to subject formation than the temporally bounded carnival event. A Portuguese medical essay from 1981, for instance, describes a transsexual “patient” who had been born and raised in Lourenço Marques. The report narrates – in a medicalised and linear manner – a familiar story of transgender identification, from neglecting male toys in preference of dolls, to playing with and wearing female clothes. At age 7, the “patient” attended carnival dressed as a woman, including a wig that had been gifted to them by their father.⁷⁹



Advert for a travesti competition, Notícias, 1972.

Another interlocutor, João, tells a similar story, although from a different standpoint. Born in 1956 in a black family, João had spent most of his childhood and youth in the suburbs, in the neighbourhood of Mafalala, Mulhanga, Maxaquene, and Malanga, where his mother sold “traditional alcohol” and snacks, such as fried lungs. In his teenage years, he

⁷⁹ Gomes, Francisco Allen et. al. (1981). “Considerações clínicas a propósito de um caso de transexualismo”, *Acta Médica Portuguesa*, 2, 201-209.

met a group of slightly older men, with whom he became friends. Coming from the Gaza province, these friends defied social norms and gender convention by adopting a feminine gender expression and practicing same-sex sex work downtown. While living and playing with them, João recalls feeling a pervasive sense of shame: “Well, the men and women in the neighbourhood spoke of them: ‘and those guys, how is it possible? Wearing scarves? Braiding their hair? And what-not.’ But they were my friends, and because I was in that group, and didn’t abandon them.” Even if he was in that group of friends, João remained mostly discrete: “I was closed, and no one could know about me.” The only exception to his cultivated practices of discretion was the carnival, where he would attend the street festivities in the evenings. João recalls that, since childhood, he had felt a desire to wear women’s clothes. The ability to do so openly and without fears of outing himself attracted him to the carnival as a space of freedom. “I used to go there, dressed as a woman. I would even wear breasts”, he admits.⁸⁰

The narratives by Manuela, Eduardo and João, in my view, pushes us to return to the idea of carnival as a practice of transgression, freedom, and utopian imagination that is deeply mediated, grounded, on the body in motion, dancing, singing, and experiencing joy, pleasure, and liberation. The concept of “alegropolitics” developed by Ananya Kabir is instructive here. As Kabir explains it, alegropolitics is a “politics of embodied happiness” that circulates through “culture-specific routes, (*transversing*) the intersection of several transnational and local axes.”⁸¹ In this paper, I have explored the carnival in Lourenço Marques as a “site of struggle”, placed between attempts of domestication by the colonial state and co-optation by private capital, but also critically positioned as a potential site of freedom. The alegropolitics of the body in disguise, on the dance floor, cross-dressed, allow us to rethink these practices, and forms of subversion, indiscipline, and transgressive affect that they make possible, even without falling under the historical categories of “political consciousness” that tend to exclude many subjectivities from histories of struggle and liberation. Thinking of dancing and cross-dressing along these lines, I believe, allows for new

⁸⁰ Interview with João. João has been always “in the closet” and expressed the fear of having his sexual proclivities revealed. This goes to reinforce the idea of the Carnival as a time in which one could cross-dress publicly without fear of being considered a homosexual.

⁸¹ Kabir, Ananya Jahanara (2020). “The Fleeting Taste of Mazaa: From embodied philology to an alegropolitics for South Asia”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.

histories of gender and sexuality, grounded on the archive but also on the registers of the corporeal and the performative.