

Revelry, Inclusion, and Disability in the Street Carnival of Rio de Janeiro

Dr Andrew Snyder
Integrated Researcher in
Brass Band Movements



Abstract

In Rio de Janeiro, the vibrant world of the diverse ensembles of "street carnival" known as "blocs" is distinct from the world-famous samba schools and has been expanding exponentially in the last two decades. Central to the ethics of many of these blocs has been a commitment to being participatory, free, democratic, and inclusive. These blocs have diversified considerably in the last decade along lines of race, class, and gender. However, until recently, a notable absence has been a focus on inclusion of people with disabilities. One of the major "alternative" ensembles of street carnival, Orquestra Voadora, has sought to rectify its previous lack of explicit attention to disabled people, seeking to combat ableism in its carnival practices.

In 2018, the group formed a working group of band members, accessibility specialists, and disabled participants, aiming to make their carnival practices more inclusive. Recognizing that "disability" is

Image

Orquestra Voadora's carnival bloco in 2012. Courtesy of André Ramos.

a word that encompasses many diverse realities, the band has sought to adopt general strategies to make their events more accessible and also respond to individual needs, responding through accommodations but working toward a broader culture of accessibility. In 2021, Voadora produced documentary videos of this work along with interviews featuring the testimonies of disabled participants. Based on discussion of the project as presented in the videos and building on nearly a decade of work on Rio's street carnival, I explore in this article Voadora's initial strategies to militate for a more accessible carnival future.

Introduction

Carnival has many animating myths—it is ideally subversive, democratic, and an experience of freedom—but perhaps none is aggressively defended in Rio de Janeiro as the belief that carnival is a space of free participation for a wide variety of diverse communities. In contrast to the samba parades, which are expensive events to witness, street carnival blocos—mobile, participatory, music ensembles—are indeed financially free, as they happen in public space at no charge and, theoretically, anyone is invited to participate. However, saxophonist André Ramos, who helps organise the efforts of Orquestra Voadora's bloco to include people with disabilities (*peessoas com deficiências*), reflects, “I dispute this idea that this carnival that we here in Rio call ‘free’ [*livre*], the street carnival, is really free... Imagine that everyone you know is going to street carnival and having fun, and you can't be there because that space has excluded you in some way” (2021). As he writes in the declaration of the broader accessibility project with which Voadora acts in partnership, “carnival's essence is its democratic nature, but for the ideal to be truly achieved, it must be equally accessible to all and include people with disabilities” (Ramos et al. 2020).

Indeed, from the perspective of people with disabilities, street carnival, an enormous community of blocos not associated with the city's famous and elaborate samba schools,¹ has many barriers to access. Voadora's gigantic bloco, which plays on the Tuesday of carnival, typically involves around 300 musicians playing brass and percussion under Rio's baking sun for an audience that grew every year until the pandemic, and numbered over 100,000 in 2020. This multitude is jammed with revelers who aim to get as close as possible to the chord (*corda*) that separates them from the musicians, where they can better hear the music and witness the spectacle that includes stilt-walkers, puppets, flags, standards, and a wide variety of imaginative costumes (*fantasias*). Ramos explains that, in such a setting, a person with a disability might have to put in a Herculean effort to be part of the event. He muses that one might react upon seeing a person in a wheelchair at a crowded bloco with “a first line of thought that is ‘how cool that guy is here,’ and yes it is very cool individually. But there is nothing cool about something that requires a major overcoming of barriers [*superação*] to be there—that really is something that the collective has to change. We have to find a way to welcome these people” (2021).

Since 2018, Orquestra Voadora has developed an “accessibility group” (grupo de acessibilidade) made up of band members, participants with disabilities, and accessibility professionals. This group works in partnership with the project “Acessibilifolia,” organised by the Projeto Um Novo Olhar (The New View Project), which fights for accessible arts education. The project is supported by Brazil’s National Arts Foundation (Funarte) and the School of Music at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro where Ramos was completing a Master’s degree in music as of 2021. “Acessibilifolia” is a neologism that unites the Portuguese words for accessibility (acessibilidade) with “folia,” or revelry, and the project seeks to promote accessibility in various forms of celebration throughout Brazil.

In alliance with Acessibilifolia, Voadora’s accessibility group has sought to make logistical and social changes in the broader world of Voadora in order to make participation at all levels more accessible to people with disabilities, including playing an instrument, conducting sound engineering, participating in event organization, and celebrating as a folião/foliona (audience member or “reveler” in masculine and feminine). Though these efforts to increase accessibility are still in initial stages, Voadora’s project highlights the right of people with disabilities to cultural engagement – in particular in forms of cultural engagement that are volatile and relatively uncontrolled, distinct from spaces of “high culture” such as concert halls and museums, where some progress at accessibility has been made. Camila Alves, one of the participants with disabilities in Voadora, draws attention to the importance of making liminal events accessible beyond everyday life, suggesting, “this is an important initiative for us to push for the idea that people with disabilities can be in all spaces. We need more than medical actions.... but places of culture, happiness, and festivity” (Projeto UNO, Episode 7).² In an effort to “provoke people to think about the accessibility or lack thereof of cultural and educational spaces as well as the city as a whole” (Ramos et al. 2020), Ramos produced a series of short documentaries, containing testimonies from people with disabilities who participated in Voadora, called “Inclusion and Revelry” (Inclusão e Folia), which was also the first action of the larger Acessibilifolia project. Based on the testimonies of these participants emerging from these videos and an interview with Ramos, this article examines Voadora’s strategies to make carnival more accessible, as they developed before the pandemic temporarily prohibited the continuation of their activities.

For Voadora’s accessibility group, such an effort requires structural changes and a collective confrontation with ableism (capacitismo), what disability rights activist TL Lewis defines, in the first part of a working definition, as “A system that places value of people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity” (2021). In a text produced explaining the project, Voadora argues that, rather than festivities making the world more free for people with disabilities, “the ableism and inaccessibility that characterise life in cities are reproduced and often accentuated in festivities” (Ramos et al. 2020). Only a conscious action

¹ Though Rio’s important samba school tradition has received the bulk of scholarly attention, the resurgent street carnival festivities are increasingly being studied as well. Rio’s street carnival blocos have experienced a momentous “revival” since Brazil emerged from its military dictatorship in 1985 with an ever-increasing number of blocos appearing in the streets, numbering over 500 in the last carnival of 2020 before the pandemic hit (see Snyder 2022 and Fernandes 2019). More broadly, carnival in Brazil is a national obsession—with particular fervor in Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Recife, among other locales—and Voadora’s project seeks to use their project as an example to this broader carnival world.

² This is a point Alves develops in her book *E Se Experimentássemos Mais* (2020) in which she theorises “aesthetic accessibility” specifically in the context of making museum spaces more accessible. More broadly, there are various attempts globally to make festivals more accessible and create festivals focused on disability (see Snyder and Mitchell 2008 for only one example), though the subject of disability and festivity is very poorly studied. Voadora’s efforts at including people with disabilities in such a raucous event as Rio’s street carnival is without parallels in the literature I have surveyed.

of structural transformation can combat ableism in festive practices. As disability studies scholars broadly argue, disability, like other social categories such as race and gender, is a social category created by an ableist society that normalises exclusive practices and discrimination based on individual capacities.³ For Ramos, deconstructing these norms requires constant attention to how a group like Voadora has “naturalised” culturally constructed oppressive practices. For him, this work is a condition for creating a distinctly anti-ableist carnival culture.

I argue that, beyond promoting the rights to culture of people with disabilities in an ableist world, Orquestra Voadora rejects a separatist model⁴ of disability arts and music,⁵ one that Alves describes as encompassing “events tailored to people with disabilities who knows where, with a ton of people with disabilities” (Projeto UNO, Episode 1). Instead they embrace an inclusive model, one that prizes accessibility but is not only inclusive at the margins, and rather demands structural changes for all involved, even if this a goal that remains to be fully realised.⁶ Ramos characterises the participation of people with disabilities in Voadora as a “meeting” (encontro) of people with diverse experiences and needs, and he stresses that this is not a “perfect meeting—it’s one that has many questions remaining to be resolved—but it is a powerful encounter with a great deal of potential” (Projeto UNO, Episode 1).

One way that this “imperfection,” or incompleteness, might be understood is based on the distinction between accommodation. This generally refers to an individualised change granted to a person with a disability, presuming a burden of proof of the disability, and access, which provides structural changes aiming to make a space accessible to a person with a disability, without needing to request accommodation. Much of Voadora’s initial work has been based on finding solutions to inclusion for particular people based on their individual needs in ways that might be considered closer to accommodation, but these steps point towards a larger goal of accessibility, represented in the project name Acessibilifolia. An ultimate goal for the bloco could be understood as akin to the concept of “universal design,” a term coined by Ronald Mace to describe “barrier-free” environments that are useable by anyone (Mace et al. 1998). Embracing the belief that festive experiences can resonate beyond the ephemeral experience, they hope that participants’ experiences in these events will make broader changes in the social culture of Voadora, participants’ personal lives, and festive events in Brazil in a broader sense. Ultimately, Voadora rejects a zero-sum framework whereby the gains of rights by people with disabilities might be seen as limiting those of non-disabled people. They suggest instead that these efforts to promote access will create a more inclusive, empowering, and caring culture for all participants to thrive.

Though the data for this research was collected virtually during the pandemic, the article is also based on my longstanding ethnomusicological research since 2013 on Orquestra Voadora and Rio’s larger street carnival community of which the group is a part.⁷ As a

³ Growing out of the disability rights movement, the interdisciplinary field of disability studies has offered a sociopolitical analysis of disability as a constructed category and critiqued the medical interpretation of disability as deficit and disorder to be normalised (see Davis 2016; Shakespeare 2016).

⁴ This project can, for example, be distinguished from Bloco Senta que Eu Empurro (the Sit While I Push Bloco) founded in 2008 in Rio, which is specifically created for people with disabilities, as opposed to Voadora’s goal of including people with disabilities into a space not designed solely for them.

⁵ The intersection of disability studies and music/performance is a growing focus of research (see, for example, Howe et al. 2016; Bakan 2015a, 2015b; Lerner and Straus 2006; Straus 2006, Sandahl and Auslander 2005).

⁶ Dylan Robinson might call the addition of marginalised people at the margins “additive inclusion” in distinction to actions that dismantle and renew social structures (2019).

⁷ See Snyder (2022; 2021a; 2021b; 2020; 2019a; and 2019b).

trumpet player, I played with Voadora and many other brass bands and blocos, and I taught in Voadora's music classes (oficinas) that prepare the musicians to participate in the annual carnival bloco. This research that was particularly intense during doctoral fieldwork from 2014 to 2016 when I, by contrast, did not witness disability to be a foremost concern to participants. An early draft of this article was distributed by Ramos to those who participated in the documentary, and they were encouraged to give feedback which was incorporated into the final version in a process of "dialogic editing" (Feld 1987). My thinking on anti-ableism has been strongly influenced by the anti-ableist organizing work of my wife and our relationship with her brother, who has Down syndrome. I do not (currently) identify as disabled, and I experience many privileges in the world as a white, cis-hetero, US American man.

Orquestra Voadora: Band, Bloco, Class, Movement

Orquestra Voadora was founded in 2008, and first participated in street carnival in 2009, which it continued to do annually until the pandemic's unprecedented cancelation of carnival in 2021. Influenced both by the revivalist brass blocos of street carnival that played traditional Brazilian carnival genres and by eclectic styles of brass and popular music from New Orleans to the Balkans, Voadora's repertoire is an eclectic mix of music that is a unique Brazilian twist on "world music" (Snyder 2019a). "Orquestra Voadora" (The Flying Orchestra) can refer both to a presentation performance band of twelve members, who play gigs professionally, and to a participatory bloco. The latter is theoretically open to anyone that has an instrument, along with the desire to learn the bloco's repertoire and perform it at carnival in a massive spectacle. The bloco rehearses every Sunday afternoon for about five months before carnival, and in 2013 the band also opened an oficina, or band-led class of around 300 participants that runs throughout the year on Tuesdays, devoted to instrumental instruction and open to beginners (2019b).

The bloco and oficina led to an exponential expansion of new musicians and bands that play a wide variety of repertoires in Rio's public spaces. This community grew to be an increasingly definable movement that came to be known as neofanfarrismo, of which Orquestra Voadora is one of the most popular, professional, and influential representatives. As brass bands from other countries, especially France and the United States, began to visit the city beginning in the 2000s, the movement increasingly networked with the transnational network of alternative brass bands that had consolidated around the HONK! Festivals of Activist Brass Bands, a festival network that had emerged in the Boston area in 2006 and spread around the world (Snyder, Allen, and Garofalo 2020). In 2015, the Carioca movement held the first annual HONK! Rio Festival of Activist Brass Bands, which gave the movement a definitively activist identity. The HONK! festival network has since spread around Brazil, with five HONK! festivals in the country. The neofanfarrismo movement has defined its avowedly leftist activism in diverse ways, including participating in protests, playing for free in public space, and adopting inclusive strategies that promote the musicianship of



Image

Voadora's weekly oficina.
Photo by author in 2014.

those with no experience in music, especially those of marginalised communities.

In line with the HONK! ethos, in a musical sense, the band has offered a critique of the concept of ability from its inception, but one initially limited primarily to non-disabled people. Unlike the earlier stage of brass ensembles that revived traditional repertoires of Rio's street carnival, not all of Voadora's band musicians were professionally trained players. The bloco they manage is formed by a wide range of interested musicians, from professionals to amateurs to beginners. By rejecting the notion that a certain kind of musical ability is required to participate in Rio's iconic festivity, the band and movement opened the door to many people engaging in musical projects for the first time.

However, this revision of musical ability did not necessarily offer access to marginalised communities, as Voadora and the neofanfarrismo movement are also manifestations of one of the more privileged communities in Rio de Janeiro – what many referred during my fieldwork as the “alternative middle class.” Many neofanfarristas are university-educated, the movement is much whiter than other popular scenes such as the samba schools, and it has been largely male-led. As the movement took on an increasingly activist identity, it has diversified impressively in the past decade – all-women groups were born out of Voadora's oficina as the ranks of female musicians have exploded, and brass band projects from favelas and peripheral areas of the city have been founded (Snyder 2022). One could see Voadora's suggestion that the inclusion of disabilities is a logical extension of the band's interest in creating an evermore diverse, democratic bloco, and therefore living up to a conception of a truly free carnival. Until 2018, however, disability rights were largely not on the community's radar – a problem that Ramos associates with a broader neglect of the issue in the left's focus on class, race, and gender.

Voadora's Accessibility Group

In the introduction to the documentary series "Inclusion and Revelry," Ramos explains that the band had always attracted a wide range of people and saw itself as facilitating "carnival's power of encounter" between diverse communities. They had also always had the participation of people with disabilities in their bloco and oficina in small numbers, and they were welcomed in a "natural and spontaneous way," but without a conscious, collective approach. In 2018, the group resolved to take a "structured action" (Projeto UNO, Episode 1). Founding the accessibility group, they began to conduct interviews with participants with disabilities to better understand what kinds of barriers to access and participation they faced. They started to think about logistical questions for their carnival bloco and pedagogical questions for their oficina. They put out public calls specifically inviting people with disabilities to take part, and explaining that they were willing to put in the work to make carnival an accessible space for those who wanted to participate.

A principal preoccupation in this endeavor has been thinking about how to increase the "representivity" (representividade) of people with disabilities in Voadora's social sphere, that is, how to break what Ramos calls the "vicious cycle of exclusion" that occurs when the lack of people with disabilities becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. How to create a space in which people with disabilities are not "excluded a priori? Since there is no one with disabilities in a [given space], a person with disabilities might believe that any such events are exclusive to begin with" (Ramos 2021). To break the cycle, the accessibility group agreed that this effort must be led by and in coordination with people with disabilities themselves, in alliance with the well-known slogan associated with the disability rights movement, "Nothing about us without us." The non-disabled participants of the band could not effectively arrive and apply their own frameworks for accessibility without them.

In this work with people with disabilities, they aimed to move from the realm of the abstract to concrete actions. For Ramos, this shift from the abstract to concrete had a personal dimension, marked by the birth of his niece in 1999, who has the rare chromosomal condition of 5p-, or "cri du chat":

"When she was born, I felt remorse—how could I not have thought about this before? Why was it that I only started to think about this when it happened to person close to me?... Unfortunately we live in a situation of such great exclusion [of people with disabilities] that when there is no one in your radar, it remains abstract." (2021)

In this case of carnival blocos, similarly, as Ramos explains,

"You can imagine what a person with a disability might need in the abstract, but this changes completely when this person is a concrete person that you know and have exchanged with...These days, it's no longer something abstract, like 'what do we do if there is a person with a disability at the bloco?' No, that person is Fernanda, it's Antônio." (2021)

As the numbers of people increase in participation, they hope that presence will build on itself exponentially, bringing concrete questions to be resolved and accommodated in order to make the space more accessible.

This concretization has been especially important in the group's thinking about the diverse actions necessary to welcome people with such a diverse range of needs. Disability, as Ramos explains, is a word that "encompasses many different realities" (Projeto UNO, Episode 1)—visual, auditory, physical, locomotive, cognitive—and "within each of these disabilities there is also an individual with their specific capacities and needs" (Ramos 2021). Building an accessible carnival culture requires both general structural changes—including physically changing the spatial layout of carnival events or creating legible materials through sign language, braille, audio captioning, and reading text aloud—as well as responding to individual needs. In their text explaining the project, it is clear that this aspiration to make carnival more accessible does not stop short at accommodating a few people who might be interested in taking part, but an entire structural transformation of the group's roles and activities in search of accessibility:

"Making carnival accessible means facilitating the participation of people with disabilities in all the spaces that make up this environment. We must guarantee their representivity not only in the audience of carnival, but equally in the organization of blocos and parades, in the production of music, dance and other forms of art, as well as in the world of work created by carnival." (Ramos et al. 2020)

But how are these lofty goals manifested in practice?

The documentary video series entitled "Inclusion and Revelry" that Voadora released in partnership with Um Nova Olhar offers the perspectives and testimonies of some of the people with disabilities who have been most involved in these efforts. The videos themselves are meant to be accessible to people with auditory and visual disabilities. Each video opens with the visuals explained simultaneously by the voice over: "At the center of the white screen, the title in braille appears and letters flash 'Um Novo Olhar.' Confetti on the screen. At the top of the screen emerges in red 'Accessibilifolia.'" The video often pauses so that the voice-over can describe each person's physical features and their surroundings as well as footage of the interviewees participating in carnival and Voadora's bloco. Audio captioning in Portuguese appears at the bottom of the screen along with a sign language interpreter, and all written text, such as the credits that appear at the end, is also read aloud. The rest of this article examines the testimonies and perspectives offered in the videos regarding Voadora's aim to create an accessible carnival bloco.



Image

Screenshot of documentary series intro showing braille translation.

⁸ See *Maior (2015)* for context on the history of disability rights in Brazil.

Inaccessible Carnival

The documentary testimonials describe the diverse ways that carnival is an inaccessible space for people with disabilities. Connecting the physical attributes of the street to the practices of street carnival, the interviewees argue that inaccessibility is not just limited to the blocos' social and cultural practices, but to the physical architecture of the street and the city more broadly. Foliona Fernanda Shcolnik, who has low vision, describes Rio de Janeiro as a city where the "sidewalks are badly kept, and there are holes in the street and varying levels [of pavement]" (Projeto UNO, Episode 3). Foliona Camila Alves, who is blind, argues that "street carnival brings with it the mark of inaccessibility... Street carnival is as inaccessible as the street is inaccessible" (Projeto UNO, Episode 3). The diverse forms of urban accessibility interact with the varying needs of each person with a disability in different ways. For Shcolnik, infra-structural problems greatly hamper her vision at night, while a bloco in a hilly neighborhood such as Santa Teresa is particularly inaccessible in a wheelchair.

Saxophonist Heitor Luiz, a wheelchair user, notes that in a city as unequal as Rio "accessibility is widely variable from neighborhood to neighborhood, which has a lot to do with socioeconomic conditions." Indeed, accessibility equipment can be expensive, and middle-class neighborhoods with more accessibility infrastructure, including those that line the Bay of Guanabara (such as Ipanema and Copacabana), are generally flat, offering radically different challenges from the hilly, poorer, and not up-to-code favelas that jut up between middle-class neighborhoods. Orquestra Voadora, like much of the street carnival, remains predominantly an expression of the city's middle classes, despite its many efforts to diversify, and the interviewees with disabilities themselves appear to be primarily middle-class and towards the whiter end of Brazil's racial spectrum. Without broader structural efforts that radically remake the architecture of the city and the extreme inequalities that are woven into it, cultural practices like those of the city's blocos are limited in their impact. They seek to better navigate inaccessible architecture over which they have limited power, while broader political fights push for structural advances for disability rights.⁸

However, if based in an unexamined ableist worldview, the blocos' cultural practices, as Ramos argues, can also accentuate an already inac-

cessible city. Interviewees speak especially of the problems of crowding at street carnival events, which, unlike the samba school parades which have assigned seats,⁹ involve a mostly entirely uncontrolled competition to get closer to the music. Joana Vargens recounts that when her daughter Maria, who uses a wheelchair, was smaller, she went to participate in Voadora in the early days of the bloco, but "it got really mega big, really crowded, tons of people, and I basically quit. I told myself, no, it's impossible, it's a hassle. And there were two years when we just didn't even stay in Rio during carnival" (Projeto UNO, Episode 5). Finding a place away from the crowded areas left them far from the sound and energy of the event, and even then taller people would block Maria's view. André Rola, photographer of carnival events among others and father of Bárbara who also uses a wheelchair, relates that they had to "force" themselves to be present at carnival events, what Ramos describes as "overcoming barriers."

Crowding is, of course, also a problem for everyone – I myself often felt almost crushed in masses of bodies at street carnival events, unable to make my way through a crowd to exit. One way that blocos have sought to reduce crowding is limiting information to the whereabouts of events – relying on word of mouth and secrecy instead of public advertisement. But Ramos argues that if "you parade with a secret bloco and you don't tell anyone except your friends that you will roll at 4:30 in the morning at a distant location, you will create something limited to only a small sector with your group of people" (2021). In other words, this ableist strategy of withholding information to make more accessible events creates other barriers to accessibility.

Making Orquestra Voadora (More) Accessible

Voadora's first public and major action to include people with disabilities, resulting from the formation of the accessibility group in 2018, was to create an "accessibility section" (ala de acessibilidade) for 2019 carnival bloco. "Alas" refer to the differentiated sections of carnival parade groups, which reach a high degree of complexity in the samba schools in particular. In Voadora, there are alas for each instrument, as well as for stilt walkers, sound car managers, and other participants. The aim was for this accessibility section to be primarily for foliões with disabilities who wanted to enjoy the experience in an uncrowded space inside the chord, that differentiates the bloco from the audience with others accompanying them as needed. Joana Vargens and her daughter Maria, who had stopped participating in carnival as described above, heard about the ala and participated in 2019. Joana relates with delight,

"It was the greatest carnival...we were inside the bloco, next to the sound, and we managed to dance, participate, and move around. To be with all the people in tranquility...Maria loved it...she was glued to the music and the vibrations, enchanted with the stilt walkers."

(Projeto UNO, Episode 5)

Foliona Camila Alves, who is blind, likewise reflects emotionally about

⁹ Outside of the scope of this article, the samba schools have been working to make their events more accessible as well, which is in some ways an easier endeavor due to higher level of organization and control of their events. The high level of chaos of street carnival, for many a crucial element of the event's carnivalesque authenticity, presents a different array of accessibility questions to be resolved.

her experience participating in the accessibility section: “To be in the middle of the band, amidst the stilt walkers, to be among other people with disabilities too, which I hadn’t experienced in carnival until then, this was all very powerful—this sensation of belonging in carnival” (Projeto UNO, Episode 2). She was accompanied that carnival by three friends who had pledged to help her experience the blocos, but because of Voadora’s accessibility section her experience there was distinct from other spaces where her friends had to make sure to help and protect her amidst the carnival chaos: “to be with them inside the chord, have fun with them, and not be in this alternation of who is going to have fun and who is going to take care of me, this was also very powerful” (Projeto UNO, Episode 2).

The accessibility section received similar praises from other interviewees, but after the first year the accessibility group raised new questions about having a distinct section for people with disabilities. They worried that this practice reinforced separation, even segregation, between participants with disabilities and the non-disabled. But the question of mixing foliões into band spaces brought other logistical concerns. Ramos notes that if he, as a saxophonist, were to enter the space of the percussion, it would cause disturbances: “the ‘free space’ of the band isn’t really free... circulation is already quite limited” (2021). Beyond this issue, the diversity of needs of the foliões with disabilities shifted this practice of maintaining a separate accessibility section somewhat in the following year of 2020 when foliões with disabilities were dispersed more according to their needs and interests.

In line with the goal of integrating people with disabilities in all spaces of the bloco, Voadora has sought to provide musical education at the oficina to people with disabilities, preparing them to participate musically in the bloco. These efforts have required the oficina teachers to combat the ableist naturalization of musical pedagogy concerning how the body supposedly should interact with an instrument to produce music. Heitor Luiz, who is interviewed in the film and uses a wheelchair, chose the saxophone to play in the bloco and became Ramos’s student. Ramos describes his work with Luiz as a change of the prism through which he sees the world, as he shifted his standard pedagogy in his work with



Image

Screenshot showing celebrations at Voadora with sign language and captioning.

Luiz: "Instrumental pedagogy," he argues, "presupposes a normalization of the body. You have to be open to new and different ways to hold the instrument, how to breathe. You have to be open to another conception of the instrument, sound, and space" (2021). This insight reflects a desire not only to accommodate his pedagogy to Luiz, but to create a more accessible pedagogy for all.

The participants with disabilities offered other practical advice to Voadora's planning group to accommodate them. Luiz, for example, gave the simple idea of planning to have access-support people ready to accompany wheelchair users from the metro to the bloco practice areas and parade starting point. Folião Antônio Bordallo, who uses a wheelchair and participates in Voadora, argues that blocos can develop not only accessibility sections but use the internet to facilitate participation in them so that people with disabilities can sign up to participate.

Beyond general and individualised responses that can facilitate the participation of people with disabilities, the interviewees argue that it is necessary to develop a culture of accessibility among participants that is fundamentally receptive to the diverse needs that can never be fully anticipated. Foliã Fernanda Shcolnik, who has low vision, refers to the need for Voadora to develop "attitudinal accessibility" (acessibilidade atitudinal), which

is the question of people's attitudes. For example, crossing the street is a situation when it is great when people help, or at least offer help. You can ask, 'do you want help?' 'What do you want me to do?' Often people don't feel they know how to help or even how to ask—'how would I know how to help a blind person? I don't know what to do.' Well, you can speak to them normally. They might not see, but they will talk to you. (Projeto UNO, Episode 4)

Attitudinal accessibility aims to shift the responsibility for accommodation from the individual person with the disability to the collective culture's concern with reducing barriers to access.¹⁰

"Everybody Wins with Accessibility"

As described above, the strategic effort to include people with disabilities follows several other efforts to diversify Orquestra Voadora, which began as a primarily middle-class, whiter, and predominantly male group, but has in the 2000s become much more diverse along lines of class, race, and gender. The interviewees connect the accessibility group's work to a larger preoccupation with the intersectional inclusion of all marginalised communities. This effort connects to the second part of TL Lewis's working definition cited above which continues by arguing that ableism promotes

¹⁰ Shcolnik's insight points towards disability justice movement leader Mia Mingus's concept of "access intimacy," "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs...Disabled people's liberation cannot be boiled down to logistics. Access intimacy is interdependence in action" (Mingus 2011).

constructed ideas [that] are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and 'behave.' You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism. (2021)

Similarly, the interviewees suggest that the creation of an accessible bloco does not only improve the lives of people with disabilities, but rather, as Fernanda Shcolnik argues, "everybody wins with accessibility."

Camila Alves notes a "synchronicity" in Voadora's 2019 carnival parade, which was the first after the formation of the disability group and the year the bloco made a public homage to councilwoman Marielle Franco. Franco was a Black, lesbian member of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSoL), who had been assassinated the year before, possibly by those allied with extreme-right president Jair Bolsonaro, in power since 2018. Her image appeared all around Rio as the left mourned her loss, and she became the face of persistent resistance to Bolsonaro's dismissal of the rights of marginalised communities. In 2019, Voadora placed a massive banner of her face on their sound car, bloco participants were encouraged to visually commemorate her, and Franco's partner, Mônica Benício, spoke to the crowd in remembrance of Franco and her work, ending her speech with the fullhearted claim that "carnival is resistance" (Projeto UNO, Episode 6). Though Voadora had already been preoccupied with diversification and activism, the 2019 carnival was a heightened space for these concerns when, as Alves explains, "we were talking a lot about the rights of minorities and resistance" (Projeto UNO, Episode 6). Heitor Luiz notes that with "all the discourses against feminism, against Black people, against the LGBT+ movement, the responses impact the movements of people with disabilities as well" (Projeto UNO, Episode 6).¹¹

Beyond this intersectional convergence of movements fighting for the inclusion of diverse marginalised communities within the world of Orquestra Voadora, Fernanda Shcolnik argues that accessibility has positive, practical impacts on everyone involved. For example, a broken sidewalk, as many are in Rio, might be an insurmountable barrier for a



Image

Screenshot of Fernanda Shcolnik using cane walking with small group of Voadora musicians.



Image

Franco's partner speaking to Voadora bloco from sound truck above Franco's image.

¹¹ *This intersectional analysis points towards a framework of "disability justice," which considers disability and ableism in relation to other forms of systemic oppression, such as racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Conceived by queer, disabled women of color, disability justice critiqued previous disability rights movements such as those that led to the Americans for Disabilities Act in 1990 for their limited focus on physical disabilities, often leaving aside intellectual disabilities. Similar to the depictions of second wave feminists by third wave feminists, they argue that the advocacy of previous disability rights movements has often been limited to people with disabilities who have other privileged racial, class, and gender identities (see Sins Invalid 2019).*

person with a disability, but it is also a danger and burden for anyone trying to use it. Antônio Bordallo notes that if blocos construct corridors through crowds of foliões for people with disabilities to securely reach the bloco, these could also be used by anyone in case of "emergency or someone having a difficult time with heat or alcohol" (Projeto UNO, Episode 4). Throwing trash on the ground, as many blocos leave a littered landscape in their wake, is especially disruptive for the mobility of people with disabilities, but it is a problem for everyone. For Shcolnik,

When you have an accessible space, it is a democratic space for everyone because accessibility doesn't harm people who don't have disabilities. It often helps them too because accessibility is not only for people with disabilities, but for a mother with a stroller or an older person with a cane... This is good for everybody.

(Projeto UNO, Episode 6)

A More Accessible Carnival Future

Orquestra Voadora's work to include people with disabilities has initially been focused on creative solutions to promote the integration of diverse peoples in physical space. Of course, as with any effort to physically draw people together in space, Voadora's accessibility efforts—along with almost all other activities—were drastically disrupted by the pandemic, which descended in 2020 right after the second carnival parade since the accessibility group's formation. In response, at the time of writing in late 2021, Voadora had shifted its oficina to an online format and produced online material for the 2021 carnival show, but their activities have been very restricted. Initially, Ramos explains, they had aimed to "use the period of isolation to further plan accessibility strategies... [as] all the debates about carnival after the pandemic...must include people with disabilities in the discussion" (Projeto UNO, Episode 1). Inevitably, however, he relates that the experience of the pandemic has been profoundly unmotivating. Despite some accomplishments towards this goal, the pandemic "hasn't been a moment as full of potential that we thought it could be" (2021), as everyone

has experienced crisis, death, and deprivation from the sociality of musical community that can make thinking about carnival feel less relevant.¹²

As with so many elements of life, the accessibility group's efforts that are still going have shifted online. Though many blocos and bands have simply ceased operating, others have produced live, virtual performances. Though several have started to use sign language interpreters, Ramos noticed how few of these videos used any accessibility materials and has publicly pushed other blocos to add them to online materials. Ramos has continued to work with Um Novo Olhar to make Voadora's carnival materials more accessible, including launching the video documentary series examined here. Voadora aspires to motivate every bloco in Rio and Brazil to develop strategies to include people with disabilities. Using the resources of the internet and the opportunities of virtual communication during the pandemic, they aim to spread the idea of making such cultural activities accessible beyond the Carioca carnival community through the various global communities of which they are a part, such as the HONK! Festival circuit, which links bands like Voadora all over the world in alliance with diverse conception of musical activism.

Many elements of increasing accessibility to people with disabilities in Orquestra Voadora remain to be confronted. The video series prominently features people with physical and visual disabilities, but it does not engage with people with cognitive disabilities. Another Carioca world of people with disabilities is almost entirely absent due to the socio-economic and racial divides that characterise life in Rio de Janeiro. Specific strategies that can truly make Voadora a welcoming space for people with disabilities to play any role remain works in progress. Voadora often begins by learning how to accommodate individual people before conceiving of how to build a more accessible culture for all.

Nevertheless, in its militancy for the cultural rights of people with disabilities, Orquestra Voadora's accessibility group is ultimately focused on planting the seeds of a more accessible world in a much more ample sense than disability rights groups often strive for in their primary focus on the logistical. When Voadora takes back to the streets, they will surely build on these efforts, but they are very clear that they are only in an initial phase of inverting what Ramos calls

the cycle of exclusion. As we bring more and more people together, this will increase the representivity of people with disabilities, this will feed on itself, and so I see a possibility of advancement, of an improvement much greater than where we are now. (2021)

¹² See Snyder (2021b) for more on how street carnival participants adapted online tools during the pandemic, using sign language interpreters to increase accessibility.

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