

Educational practices during Carnival: Autism among confetti and streamers

ARTICLE

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1

Abstract

This essay aims to project symbolic references made to autism, capturing images from Carnival parades inspired by “Autistic Identity,” in order to reflect on them from an educational and inclusive perspective. In this context, the samba schools Dascuia and Princesa do Igarçu are highlighted. In 2024, they presented the themes “Colors of the heart: a journey through autism” and “Make way and let autism shine,” respectively. The text also addresses the Galo da Madrugada Carnival block in 2025, which dressed its mascot with autism symbols, and the band Nação Zumbi, which dedicated its performance at Marco Zero to autistic individuals, wearing socks with puzzle piece patterns. The purpose of this text is not to offer a negative critique of these awareness strategies; however, it concludes that it is important to challenge this debate beyond festive colors, which may unfortunately reduce the identity cause to a one-off and superficial expression.

Keywords: Autism. Carnival. Educational Practice. Non-formal Education. Identity Cause.

Práticas educativas em pleno Carnaval: o autismo entre confetes e serpentinas

Resumo

Este ensaio objetiva projetar referências simbólicas feitas ao autismo, capturando imagens de passagens carnavalescas, elaboradas a partir da “Identidade Autista”, para pensá-las sob uma perspectiva educativa e inclusiva. Deste modo, são trazidos ao escrito as escolas de samba Dascuia e Princesa do Igarçu, que, em 2024, respectivamente, enredaram os temas “Cores do coração: uma jornada pelo autismo” e “Abram alas e deixem o autismo brilhar”. Interpela-se também o bloco Galo da Madrugada, que, em 2025, vestiu sua mascota com signos do autismo, e a banda Nação Zumbi, que dedicou seu *show* no Marco Zero às pessoas autistas, fazendo uso de meias com estampa de quebra-cabeça. A intenção do texto não foi estabelecer uma crítica negativa às estratégias de divulgação da causa autista, no entanto conclui-se que é importante tencionar tal debate para além do colorido festivo, que, infelizmente, pode reduzir a causa identitária a uma manifestação pontual e superficial.

Palavras-chave: Autismo. Carnaval. Prática Educativa. Educação Não Formal. Causa Identitária.

1 Introduction

“Carnival” is a word derived from the Latin *carnis levale*, which means “to remove or abstain from the flesh.” It was the Catholic Church, back in the Middle Ages, that appropriated various pagan festivities, which were marked by the subversion of social roles, to redefine this period of human “deviations.” Incorporating these manifestations before Lent was a way of reestablishing order, allowing bodies to live out the full potential of their pleasures. In this way, the days of Carnival are days of permission for the reign of chaos.

Medieval Western civilization is, on a symbolic level, the result of the tension between Lent and Carnival. Lent is the period of fasting that originated in Christianity. And the culture of this anti-civilization finds no better way to express itself than through Carnival, which truly took hold in the 12th century, that is, at the height of the Gregorian reform, culminating in the 13th century in the very heart of cities. Carnival is a feast, an exaltation of burlesque, of good meat (Le Goff; Truong, 2006, p. 60-61).

For the purposes of this paper, we refer to performances at festivals that were related to the cycles of the planet and celebrated various gods and goddesses. The Church of the Roman Empire, which declared Christianity as the official religion, used syncretism as a way to connect with the festivities of the period that exalted fertility, represented, for example, by the Portuguese “Intrudo” or the “Carnival of Masks” in Venice.

In Brazil, Carnival has been influenced by various cultures, becoming a celebration of samba schools, Afro blocos, *maracatus*, street blocos, *axé* music, masks, costumes, allegories, sparkle, glitter, and multicolor. Ferreira (2011) understands Carnival “not as a solid cultural manifestation, crystallized and stuck in time, but as a changing expression in constant motion, capable of taking on new forms at any moment, filling voids, invading spaces, establishing other boundaries, constantly reinventing new meanings for old traditions, or new traditions for old meanings.”

That’s why, at this celebration of popular culture, there are people who spend these days dressed as animals, bandits, Pierrot, Columbine, clowns, entities from African-based

religions, cartoon characters, superheroes... some prefer costumes inspired by other carnivals, other countries, civilizations, or even little or no clothing at all. In his classic work *Carnavais, malandros e heróis: para uma sociologia do dilema brasileiro*, Roberto Damatta (1979, p. 91) mentions that Carnival is madness, because, at this time of year, “our social world, so concerned with hierarchies and the logic of ‘do you know who you’re talking to?’, is offering more openings than we can actually enter.”

Almost anything goes with the poetic license granted by the Carnival revelry. People become revelers, who strive to live out the full power of the body, the maximum pulse of matter, in just a few days of the year, seeking freedom, transgression, and criticism of social constraints. Yes, Brazil’s Carnival is a ritual that is fundamentally a political manifesto. And as such, it exposes inequalities – whether social, economic, class-based, territorial, or related to accessibility. After all, as Damatta (1979) suggests, Carnival transforms marginalized/inferior people (very significantly called “individuals” in Brazil) into “people”; and transforms “people” into “individuals.” Ultimately, Brazilian Carnival is capable of creating this zone of ambiguity in a temporary subversion.

Following this argument, “packing your bags” or “dressing up” to experience Carnival also means appropriating flags, signs, symbols, beliefs, and ideology to celebrate freedom and play with what moves us. In other words, in some way, Carnival images tell us about educational practices, intended through symbols that denote non-formal education strategies. For us, there is, to a certain extent, an educational intent behind these Carnival celebrations, which, despite subverting school contexts, reach thousands of people through a non-formal approach to education. According to Gohn (2006, p. 2),

[...] Non-formal education refers to a process with several dimensions, such as: political learning about the rights of individuals as citizens; training individuals for work through skill learning and/or potential development; learning and practicing skills that enable individuals to organize themselves around community goals, focused on solving everyday collective problems; learning content that enables individuals to interpret the world from the perspective of understanding what is happening around them; education developed in the media and by the media, especially electronic media, etc.

For Ferreira (2011), Carnival culture is dynamically established beyond official institutionalizations, which (re)organizes, (re)questions, and (re)produces itself based on everyday actions derived from Carnival practices in each social context. “In this movement, it produces texts and practices that continually establish questions, desires, and answers” (Ferreira, 2011, p. 1). It is within this context that the possibility arises to think about autism and its processes of subjectivation, as it has also been present among confetti, streamers, samba school stories, giant puppets, masks, and costumes.

The objective of this essay is to design symbolic references to autism, capturing images of Carnival parades from 2024 and 2025 in Brazil, based on “Autistic Identity,” to reflect on this human condition from an educational and social inclusion perspective. Thus, we bring to the text the samba school G.R.C.E.S. Dascuia, from Florianópolis/SC, which took to the avenue the theme “Colors of the heart: a journey through autism”; the samba school G.R.E.S. Princesa do Igarçu, from Parnaíba/PI, which sang about autism with the theme “Make way and let autism shine”; the Galo da Madrugada block from Recife, Pernambuco, paid tribute to autistic people by decorating its mascot with blue wings and a puzzle necklace around its neck; and the band Nação Zumbi, which dedicated its Carnival show held at Marco Zero in Recife, Pernambuco, to autistic people, using socks with a puzzle print as a symbol.

These Carnival episodes that address the theme of “Autistic Identity” combine with the text to form an essayistic reflection on society’s supposed permission to promote equality among bodies. In a country like Brazil, thinking of Carnival as part of popular culture means thinking of the unusual, the innovative, the diverse, the multiple, the plural. After all, “it is this plurality that creates art, culture, solidarity, rules of coexistence, belonging, self-esteem, respect for the rich heritage and identity that is so characteristic of Brazil, which needs to understand its value in order to face globalized culture” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 80). In this way, our intention is to push the debate beyond the festive atmosphere, which, unfortunately, can reduce the cause of “Autistic Identity,” which is the result of struggles by various social movements, to a one-off and superficial manifestation.

2 Autism in different Carnivals

According to Orrú (2016), Kanner categorized autism and developed his concept in the 20th century, being the first researcher to publish on this topic. In 1948, he wrote a “Manual of Child Psychiatry,” which had this subject as one of its main themes. This author revised the concept of autism several times, “[...] but always highlighting characteristics such as difficulties in relating to people, obsession with objects, attachment to routine, changes in language development, mutism” (Orrú, 2016, p. 14). Kanner claimed that it was possible to recognize these characteristics as early as the first two years of age.

Laboyer (1995) emphasizes that Leo Kanner’s focus is on identifying autism as a syndrome that was already present in utero, with the notion of social withdrawal, lack of imagination, and a link to schizophrenia in adults. Turning inward – the origin of the word “autism” – is based on the idea of an inability to interact socially and, in a way, in our understanding, comforts one’s social peers, transferring the possibilities of communication to a realm of impossibility, as a result of innate “autistic isolation.”

Currently, autism is referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), characterized, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – DSM-5 (2013), by the existence of persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, in nonverbal behaviors used for social interaction, and in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships. The DSM-5, published in 2013, is used by psychiatrists and psychologists with the main objective of classifying various mental disorders, dividing them into categories. It also provides descriptions of symptoms, prevalence of cases, and the evolution of the topics covered.

Autism, which currently circulates among schools and clinics, permeates the advent of that which is self-centered. The stranger who insists on not fitting in, not behaving, not understanding himself, is nothing new among labels and reports. His code is now well known: 6A02, which is almost always accompanied by a list of deficits and symptoms that make it impossible to read the outside, the processes of subjectivation, that which cannot be seen, because it is not written in manuals

that it fits into pieces that do not match, since they are diffuse and divergent, but biomedical power insists on doing so (Teles; Zoboli; Orrú, 2024, p. 3).

In addition to medical manuals, which categorize the bodies of autistic people through diagnosis, we use as a reference in this paper the definition of “Autistic Identity,” which, according to Teles (2024, p. 42), is constructed from a proposal to normalize a particular group, reduced to a single identity, disregarding its potential. It is the space that contains the accumulated scientific power of knowledge constituted by modern science, which affirms autistic pride as something unique and constitutes the legal apparatus that currently benefits autistic people and their families – such as Law No. 12,764, of December 27, 2012, which establishes the National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In the composition of “Autistic Identity,” we also highlight the predominance of the color blue to identify autism. This is justified by the understanding that there is a prevalence of autism diagnoses in males. Considering that, in Brazil, we still do not have official data on the number of people diagnosed with autism, we use as a reference the rates released by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States of America) on April 17, 2025, which indicate a prevalence of 1 in every 31 children aged 8 years (3.22% of the population). According to Francisco Paiva Jr. (2025), the proportion of men to women diagnosed with autism continues to decline. This factor notably contributes to the continued questioning by the autistic community of the prevalence of the color blue to identify autism.

In this study, the CDC reported a proportion of approximately 3.4 men for every woman diagnosed with ASD, compared to the previous ratio of 3.8 to 1, indicating significant progress in identifying autism among girls, who have historically been underdiagnosed (Paiva Jr., 2025, *on-line*).

However, in the book *Autism in Women: The Voice of Autistic Women* (2022), thirteen autistic women share personal accounts of “What you think society needs to know about autism in women.” Like Sophia Mendonça (2002), who is autistic, a journalist, writer, Master in Social Communication, and a transgender woman, who proposes a change in

understanding regarding the prevalence of autism in men, defending the importance of considering issues related to intersectionality and autism.

Intersectionality brings with it the understanding that there are various issues (race, gender, sex, class, religion) that make up the individual experience of being autistic. According to Orrú (2024), these characteristics can trigger physical and psychological suffering, and in order to overcome them, it is necessary to produce information that seeks to transform research processes, with the aim of reducing prejudice and discrimination. This justifies criticism of the delimitation of a single form of autism, a single color, or a single age at which one is or can be autistic.

Therefore, these data become central to elucidate and contextualize the Carnival imagery references that provoked reflection on the scope of the autism cause in such a diverse environment as Carnival in Brazil. It is important to highlight that the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (LBI) – also known as the Statute of Persons with Disabilities, Law No. 13,146, of July 6, 2015 – proposes, in its Article 1, “[...] to ensure and promote, under conditions of equality, the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms by persons with disabilities, with a view to their social inclusion and citizenship” (LBI, 2015, p. 1). The LBI brings significant advances in guaranteeing the rights of persons with disabilities, especially with regard to inclusion.

Given this context, the Carnival period presents an opportunity to promote inclusion through education, raising awareness about autism by displaying its symbols on avenues, stages, and street blocks. In this sense, we reflect on the inclusion of autistic people, considering that autism itself is multifaceted, transgressing standards associated with an unrealistic perspective of “normality” within society, contrasting directly with the predominance of autism portrayed on the avenues during Carnival. According to Silva (2015, p. 4), “Normalizing means arbitrarily choosing a specific identity as a parameter against which other identities are evaluated and ranked. [...] Normal identity is ‘natural,’ desirable, unique.”

We took as our reference the samba school G.R.C.E.S. Dascuia, from Florianópolis/SC, which was founded as a Carnival block in 2004. The name of this school

pays homage to Altamiro José dos Anjos, known as Dascuia, an illustrious figure in the Carnival of the capital of Santa Catarina. Its colors are green and pink in honor of Estação Primeira de Mangueira, a samba school in Rio de Janeiro/RJ. In 2011, Dascuia became a samba school and, in 2014, it was champion of the access group, continuing as a highlight of the Special Group of its city's Carnival.

In 2024, this association brought the theme “Colors of the heart: a journey through autism” to the avenue. The school brings, on the cover of its samba theme song, several nuances that intersect with the idea of “Autistic Identity,” namely: the blue boy with the neurodiversity symbol on his shirt, holding a blue heart with the Dascuia symbol inside; and the puzzle surrounded by sunflowers.

Figure 1 – Cover of the samba theme song “Colors of the heart: a journey through autism”



Source: Dascuia (2023).

Among the symbols that identify autism, which appear in the previous image, we highlight the puzzle, which is:

A global symbol of autism awareness – its use is legalized under Law No. 12,764 of December 27, 2012, which established the National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder, also known as the Berenice Piana Law, enacted during the administration of President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) (Teles, 2024, p. 86-87).

In turn, regarding the sunflower symbol, on July 17, 2023, Law No. 14,624/23 was enacted, formalizing the non-mandatory use of the sunflower necklace, accompanied by supporting documentation, to identify people with so-called hidden or non-visible disabilities, such as autism, attention deficit disorder (ADHD), intellectual disability, Crohn's disease, and extreme phobias (Teles, 2024). The symbol for neurodiversity is:

A symbol adopted by a segment of the autistic community as an identifying element, breaking with the monochromatic blue, is the infinity sign with the colors of the rainbow, representing neurodiversity. It is based on this understanding that we have the contrast between people with typical neurocognitive functioning (within normal standards) and atypical or neurodivergent (inadequate or outside normal standards) (Teles, 2024, p. 88).

The story was written by Carnival designer Tadeu Stangherlin, with the collaboration of AMA (Association of Parents and Friends of Autistic Children), and was narrated from the point of view of a 10-year-old boy named Autos. According to this artist, the name was inspired by the etymology of the word “autism”, from the Greek *autos*, meaning “in oneself,” suggesting that the boy is immersed in himself. Over the course of the story, with the help of his family and medicine, Autos is diagnosed with ASD. This discovery completely changes his life and his understanding of his own existence. In this environment of discovery, he is reborn from a black-and-white existence into a new multicolored space, full of life and possibilities.

As we can see next, in its samba theme song, the samba school reveals how it views autism. In the lyrics, issues related to its symbols are highlighted and questioned, from the color blue to the infinity composed of multicolors, represented in the symbol of

neurodiversity. Themes such as education, the struggles surrounding the autism cause, the characteristics of autistic people, diversity, inclusion, overcoming difficulties, among others, were also brought to the avenue. All coated, in poetic tones, with hope and the power of affection.

Blue boy
I am imagination
Of many shades
That comes from the heart
The fascinating mind comes to life in the brush
I'm the "autos" of a hill
Very close to the sky
And if I lack the verb
I give my smile
In the winds that blow
A colorful world
In the form of magic,
Figures, joy
Proof that love conquers fear
Educating me has no secret
And off I go, in search of my ideals
To be free to fly on musical notes
From the "missing pieces" I see hope
To assemble my life as a child
For the flags
That anchored my struggle
I will raise in adulthood
By the blue waves
Diversity! The light bridge of inclusion
Overcoming flowers
In the openings of this journey
If you give me your affection,
I'll give my affection
Whoever walks my path
My love will conquer
Whoever sees me pass the time
In the sweetness of memory
Wrote my story
Dascuia gratitude! The most generous mother!
I came to say that autism is in the voice of the green and pink
In the spirit of samba! In its people, my shelter
Beloved school, I am your friend
(Bottamedi, 2024, *on-line*).

The association presented itself on the avenue organized as follows: "Sector 1: Discovery and New Beginnings. Sector 2: From the Inner World to the Outer World. Sector

3: Challenges and Overcoming Them. Struggles and Achievements. Sector 4: Autos, the King of Revelry in Social Carnival” (Rissato, 2024, *on-line*). According to this author, the school’s goal was to promote a platform for inclusion and awareness about ASD.

Also in 2024, the samba school G.R.E.S. Princesa do Igaraçu, from Parnaíba/PI, brought autism to the avenue, becoming champion with the theme “Make way and let autism shine.” In the costumes and accessories worn by the celebrants, it was possible to find several references to “Autistic Identity,” especially the predominance of the color blue and the puzzle symbol.

According to Carnival designer Roberto William, the samba school is committed to creating an exciting performance, full of vibrant colors, catchy music, and engaging choreography. “The goal is to convey to the public all the magic and charm of Carnival, while raising awareness about the need for respect and inclusion of people with autism” (*Data Piauí*, 2024, *on-line*).

The Carnival designer, who is also president of the school, says that the theme was inspired by his son, who has been diagnosed with autism. The main idea of the event organizers was to raise awareness about autism, educate society, and promote inclusion. In contrast, the lyrics of the samba theme song define autistic people as “A star from a world so distant, where no one can reach, I have a fascinating glow that goes far beyond your gaze” (2024). In a way, this reference places autism as something distant from society, granting it a superhuman, almost unattainable categorization. Which, in a way, gives this condition something that sets it apart from humanity.

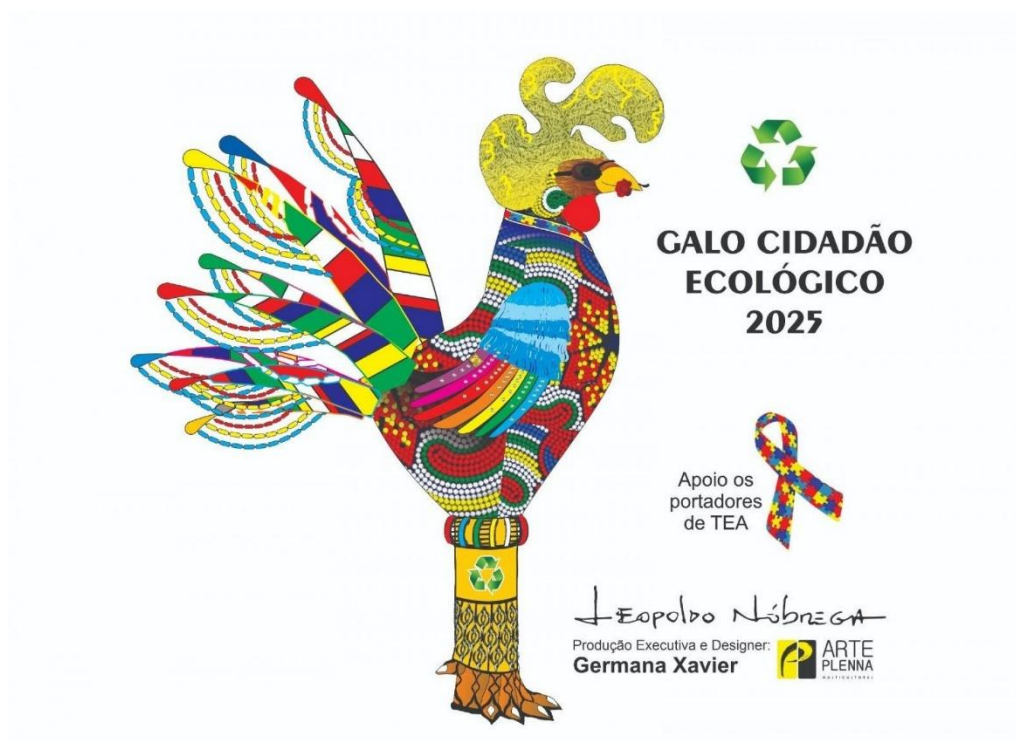
Galo da Madrugada is currently considered the largest Carnival block in the world, attracting around 2.5 million people to Recife Antigo. The celebrants follow the parade without ropes, to the sound of electric trios, rocked by frevo marches and typical Carnival songs. It was created on February 4, 1978. On that occasion, around 75 people dressed up as lost souls paraded through the streets of the São José neighborhood in Recife, Pernambuco. Amidst confetti and streamers, the revelers danced to the music of a 22-piece frevo orchestra. Thus was born the Clube das Máscaras o Galo da Madrugada, which awoke at sunrise.

In 2025, it was announced nationwide that Galo da Madrugada would pay tribute to people with autism. The idea was conceived based on the blue color on the Galo's (rooster's) wings and a puzzle necklace around its neck, aiming to convey a message of inclusion and awareness to thousands of people.

The inspiration to characterize the rooster with signs of “autistic identity” came from a request by an 11-year-old boy named Félix, who is a fan of the Carnival group.

He collects drawings from past editions, and in 2024, he had the opportunity to meet Leopoldo Nóbrega, the artist responsible for decorating the Galo (rooster). Since then, Félix has been sending drawings and expressing his desire to see something from his “little world” represented in the giant (Mendes, 2025, *on-line*).

Figure 2 – Ecological Citizen Rooster 2025



Source: Acervo de Priscilla Mello/DP.

Still in the midst of Pernambuco's Carnival in 2025, the streets of Recife Antigo took us to Marco Zero, a venue where performances by various nationally renowned artists

take place. We witnessed the show by Nação Zumbi, a band from Pernambuco that was formed in the city of Olinda/PE in 1990. In 1994, the band released the acclaimed album *Da lama ao caos* (From Mud to Chaos) on Sony Music, produced by Liminha. The original lineup was:

[...] result of the union of some members of the bands Loustal and Lamento Negro. He was a pioneer in the style that became known as “Mangue Beat,” a genre marked by a blend of traditional Pernambuco rhythms, such as *coco* and *maracatu*, with elements of rock. [...] The original lineup included Chico Science (Francisco de Assis França – March 13, 1966, Recife – February 2, 1997, Recife: vocals), Lúcio Maia (guitar), Alexandre Dengue (bass), Gilmar Bolla (drums), Gira (drums), Canhoto (snare drum), Toca Ogam (percussion), and Otto (Otto Maximiliano Pereira de Cordeiro Ferreira – June 28, 1968 – Belo Jardim, PE – percussion). The group made its first appearance at the Oásis venue in Olinda in 1991 (Dicionário Cravo Albin da Música Popular Brasileira, 2025, *on-line*).

Recognized for its lyrics, which echo social criticism of the inequalities found in Pernambuco, the band marks its territory through struggle and anti-establishment engagement. In 2025, the band dedicated their concert at Marco Zero to people with autism, using socks with a puzzle print as a symbol.

Once again, the message of inclusion for autistic people in society was featured during Carnival, to the sound of regional rhythms with a pop influence, in the capital of Pernambuco. Given the nuances outlined previously, it is undeniable that the autism cause has the power to engage people and that the social visibility of including these individuals in these contexts, which aim to raise awareness about autism, is important.

3 Conclusions

The purpose of this essay was not to criticize the strategies used to raise awareness of autism during Carnival celebrations throughout Brazil, which we consider important in the current historical context. However, we believe it is necessary to take the debate beyond the festive atmosphere, which, unfortunately, can reduce the cause of

identity, which is the result of struggles by various social movements, to a one-off and superficial demonstration.

Notwithstanding the relevance of including the topic of autism in terms of visibility, we would like to highlight here some reflections that may undermine the agenda and reduce it to something merely festive and allegorical, which, in fact, agonizes it through performances, as we present in the cultural manifestations listed in section 2. Therefore, thinking about accessibility strategies for these people in Carnival spaces, which are appropriate to the level of support and their needs, as well as assistive technology resources that enable effective inclusion, is fundamental to addressing the issue, considering the importance of the struggle of autistic people and their families to access these spaces.

Carnival itself has its own geography and, even without ropes, exposes a series of exclusionary processes that occur daily in society. This occurrence is easily observed in the presence of VIP boxes and areas and in the skin color of women and children who spend days on the streets collecting aluminum cans. Amidst the fun that emerges on the surface of Carnival, more complex complaints of exclusion can easily get lost among confetti and streamers – including the very agenda of including autistic people in society, even though it is full of good intentions.

We also argue that there is always an imminent risk of establishing labels derived from “Autistic Identity,” its symbols, and the color blue, disregarding issues related to intersectionality. Amidst all the propaganda, the processes of subjectivation of each autistic person can be lost, denoting a rhythmic mismatch between what autism actually is, as a way of existing in society, and the stereotypical biases that circulate between avenues and storylines.

We recognize the value of the intentions behind Carnival celebrations aimed at raising awareness about autism through educational practices. However, we emphasize the importance of remembering that struggles must address class inequality; the guarantee of rights that encompass effective inclusion in the educational system, with adequate support for demands; access to appropriate therapies and treatment, both in the public and

private sectors; and the creation of intersectoral policies that guarantee social inclusion, employability, and ensure a dignified future for these individuals. Finally, we remind everyone that it is up to us all to commit to removing the masks and costumes that hover over autism, even if it is in the middle of Carnival.

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15

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18

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